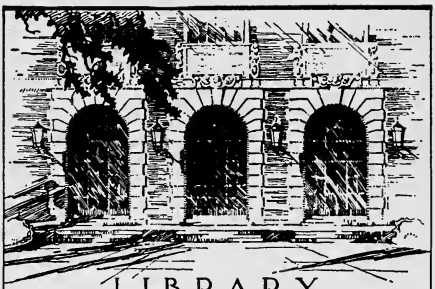

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Henry H. Dunphey -

SANS MERCI.

SANS MERCI;

OR,

KESTRELS AND FALCONS.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"GUY LIVINGSTONE," "SWORD AND GOWN,"

ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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SANS MERCI;

OR,

KESTRELS AND FALCONS.

CHAPTER I.

DILETTANTI.

And all this while, Vincent Flemyng tarried still in Rome. Yet his success had hardly been so great as might have been expected, considering the advantages under which he started there. For his introducer was more familiar with the place than most of the natives, and—albeit young in years—had long ago been gifted with the freedom of the Eternal City.

The father of Vesey Ferrars had been an amateur-painter of no small renown, and still more celebrated as a collector: he himself had never ventured on anything more ambitious

than some meek water-colours, and rarely trusted to his own judgment in picture-purchase; but there was born, and abode with him, a great veneration for Art, and affection for artists.

As a rule, the modern Mæcenas is, simply, a social nuisance. Even poor patient penniless Phormio must be sorely tried, sometimes, by that pompous benevolence, and condescension measured out by the grain; while to the disinterested public such patrons are absolutely intolerable.

But amongst those affable tyrants, Vesey was not numbered. He hated the very word 'munificent;' and would have resented its application to himself, as a personal insult. When he gave a good price for a good picture, he did not consider that he was conferring the slightest obligation; neither did he think, that the possession of one of the best private galleries in Europe, warranted him in overbearing the professional opinions of better judges. He had learnt the secret—rare amongst men of his class—of being able to render help without implying patronage:

help, too, in right good season. His name was of evil odour in the nostrils of certain dealers, dwelling in the precincts of Soho. Not unfrequently, when they had nearly clinched an admirable bargain, by the simple process of putting on the screw, they came back, to find that a timely visit from Vesey Ferrars had enabled the intended victim, for the nonce, to laugh at their beards: so the baffled middle-man was fain to depart; muttering words, much akin to those that issue from the mouths of wreckers, when they see a stranded vessel go suddenly afloat.

I think, such curses must be as well worth earning, as the blessing of a mitred bishop.

In truth, Ferrars was such a thoroughly good fellow, and had so many tastes congenial to their own, that the artist-guild would have welcomed him enthusiastically, had he come among them with never a plack in his purse. But—*abondance de bien, ne nuit jamais:* they were quite content to take him, with all the great possessions on his back that he carried so lightsomely; and the most cynical of the caricaturists forbore, even in

secret, from making a mock at his Vandyck beard, and mediæval eccentricities in velvet and feather —small vanities to which Vesey was notoriously prone.

His acquaintance with Flemyng was not of long date; it had sprung up while Ferrars was paying a brief visit to a younger brother at the same college: but he began to take an interest in Vincent, from the moment that he discovered the latter's artistic propensities. These were not very definitively developed at that time; for it was in the days of rose-coloured anticipation, when Flemyng reckoned on academic triumph as a certainty; and proposed to choose a profession, at his ease. Yet, even then, it was settled that he should bear Ferrars company that winter, to Rome.

Things were greatly altered now. But Vesey's sympathies were only enlisted more strongly, when he learnt that the other meant, henceforward, to follow Painting as a profession, instead of an amusement. He was won't to look on the silver side of every man's shield: so, it is not

wonderful that he should have given Vincent credit for much more earnestness — to say nothing of talent—than was in that weak unstable nature.

There was ever jubilation in the studios, when it was known that Vesey Ferrars had come to the fore again: before he had been twelve hours in Rome, he heard 'Welcome' spoken in nearly as many languages; and never a man of them all, but meant what he said heartily and honestly, without flattery or hope of advantage. There was usually a sort of chronic 'feed' going on during the first week after his arrival: but, on the present occasion, Vesey himself gave an entertainment of unusual splendour—not to say, solemnity — which taxed the resources of the Lepre to the very uttermost; not so much in the way of cooking, as of accommodation.

Only men of some mark were bidden to this banquet, at which Vincent Flemyng was recommended to the good graces of the whole cosmopolite fraternity: the host would have had every member of it there, had it been possible; and

was hardly contented witn that crowded representative chamber. The guests were all in high good-humour, and anything but critically disposed; moreover, Vesey Ferrars's voucher had always, hitherto, been found more or less trustworthy: nevertheless, on several of those present Vincent Flemyng's first appearance did not leave a favourable impression.

He was pleasant and polite enough, certainly; did not obtrude his own opinions, and listened to those of others with an agreeable deference; seemed determined to be pleased with everything and everybody. But artistic eyes—accustomed to watch and chronicle every varying expression of the human countenance—are very keen observers: some did not fail to remark, that little heartiness lay beneath the smooth surface-courtesy; and with such, the supercilious curl of the upper lip could not pass current for a smile.

Old Dick Haddo, who has hung about Rome these thirty years—doing nothing on earth but deliver art criticisms (which are really valuable), since a misguided relative left him a modest

competence—till he has come to be considered the *Doyen des Ateliers*, on the morrow, embodied the feeling of more than one malcontent, in his own coarse slip-shod language.

"Don't tell me, it was the garlic got into his nose"—the irascible senior grunted, in answer to a meek apologist. "I saw it turn up, before the *olla*—devilish good it was too—came into the room. The company wasn't good enough for him—not such as he'd been used to—that's about the mark of it. As if, what was good enough for Vesey, wasn't good enough for *him!* We'll have to be civil, of course; but—you mind me, boys—that chap will never let us be more, if we wished it, ever so."

Yet the opposition was decidedly weak, numerically; and Vincent Flemyng had a good working majority in his favour, to start with. His personal appearance was decidedly attractive; and this goes further perhaps, with the artistic lot than with any other purely masculine confraternity; his manner too was soft and pleasant enough—bar the covert superciliousness;

and there was a sort of suppressed brilliancy in his conversation, as if he could be more clever, if he would: moreover, in the few sketches that he had troubled himself to finish, there was undeniable promise.

That was the most provoking—though not the worst—side of Vincent's character. He was always promising: as for performance—*Altro.*

All things however considered, he got, as was aforesaid, a remarkably good start. Before Vesey Ferrars went southwards, he had done his friend a last good office, by gaining for him admission into a famous studio, whose doors, as a rule, were only opened to pupils who had already won a certain reputation. So—having omitted nothing that could set Vincent forward on his way—he left him, with great confidence, to the mercies of the Future.

But the old desultory lack of purpose, and over-weening self-confidence, that had marred the scholar's success, hung round the embryo painter, like a loose cumbrous robe: he had no idea of 'stripping to his work,' much less of

toiling slowly and steadily onwards, with strain of limb, and sweat of brow.

However, truth to tell, before he had time to settle fairly down in his new pursuits, there came a temptation into his life, that might have been a reason—if not an excuse—for idleness, in a more earnest enthusiast. I doubt gravely, if Pygmalion achieved any triumph worth mentioning, after it seemed good to Erycina to grant his prayer.

You guess what I mean, of course ?

Marion Charteris was punctual to, what we needs must call, her tryst; and, thenceforward for many a day, Art had but a fickle follower in Vincent Flemyng.

Everything happened exactly as the fair dame had predicted, or—promised. Her liege lord certainly escorted her to Rome; and saw her luxuriously established in a breezy *primo piano* on the slope of the Pincian, with an ample credit at Torlonia's. Having done this, John Charteris considered himself clear, for the present, of marital obligations; and devoted the rest of his spare time to his invalid sister. He made little differ-

ence betwixt any of his social duties; going through them all—whether as magistrate, legislator, landlord, or head of a family—with the same stolid solemn pertinacity; striving to render to every one his or her due, and never a whit more. Before the week was out, the bucolic nostalgia had possessed him, and he had started homewards; leaving his fair wife to her own devices, without a single doubt or misgiving: unless such were implied in his parting warning—

"Mind you wrap up well at night, Marion. Chills are very dangerous, here."

During that week Flemyng kept himself very much in the background: he had tact enough to know, that it would be unwise to dissemble his presence altogether; so he called once, when Mr. Charteris was nearly sure to be out, and Marion was equally sure to have some female friends with her. He need not have troubled himself to be diplomatic: it is more than doubtful, if John Charteris noticed that particular card amongst the heap of others; if he did, it is most certain that it did not cost him a second thought.

But, when King Katte's back was fairly turned, bright eyes began to gleam out of the dark corners of the Mause-Thurm; and, ere long, the innocent games began.

Vincent Flemyng could not exactly take up the flirtation at the point where he had left it —few men have the luck to do that—but he found Marion only too ready to avail herself of his escort on all possible occasions, and to accept his homage—uttered or implied. Indeed, the two were almost inseparable, though seldom—so far as the world knew—alone together. Loitering through picture-galleries of a forenoon—riding homewards over the purple Campagna through the deepening shadows—lounging in the twilight *palchi* of the Tor di Nona—withdrawn a little from the crowd of dancers thronging the saloons of Grammont, Doria, or Colonna—that pale discontented face was never far distant from Marion Charteris's 'shining shoulder.'

Discontented it was: for, day by day, the conviction forced itself more gallingly on Flemyng, that he was wooing a phantom, and striving to

grasp a snow-wreath. His over-weening vanity made him slow to recognise the truth; but he did recognise it at last, with a bitterness of spirit hard to describe. Yet the idea of relinquishing the pursuit never crossed his mind for an instant; and this pertinacity arose rather from weakness than strength of character.

A practical profligate, resolute of purpose and will, would soon have brought matters to a climax; and—if unable to bow another neck to the yoke—would, at once, have broken it from his own. But Vincent was a very tyro, in everything save theory. Moreover, his passion—breaking out, at times, in fierce fitful flashes—was by no means an all-consuming flame: it never engrossed him, to the extent of making him insensible to the temptations of high play, to which he became, daily, more and more addicted. Also, he was well aware, that the position of *cicisbeo* to a famous beauty, gave him a certain social importance, though not of the most creditable sort; and—

> He dared not put it to the touch,
> To win or lose it all.

So—occasionally indulging in feeble efforts at rebellion—he followed still in the train of his fair conqueror; a querulous, but not unwilling captive.

Yet, Marion Charteris paid more than a nominal price for her amusement.

There are women who—relying, let us hope, on their final integrity of intention—will compromise themselves more for coquetry, than others will do for crime. She, of whom I write, was one of these. Something, perhaps, ought to be set down to her deficient moral training; something more to the reckless nature inherited from the wild old robber-knight, her father: but, with all this given in, it must be owned that Marion's conduct, about this time, was imprudent in the extreme.

In most places, there would have arisen a scandal blatant and venomous. But Roman society—though free from Florentine licence—is rather inclined to lenient short-sightedness in such matters. The natives have their own little affairs to attend to; and trouble themselves not at all with alien peccadilloes: whilst, under soft

Italian skies, the British *Censor Morum* notoriously mitigates the terrors of his front, and the rancour of his tongue.

Yet two woman did take up their parable against the error of Mrs. Charteris's ways—her aunt and her sister-in-law. Of the first, Marion was rather fond; and she met that remonstrance with a gay contemptuous good-humour.

"A boy like that, bring your pupil to grief? *Pas si bête, ma tante.* Poor Vincent means no more harm than—I do. We've known each other ever since we left our nurseries, you know. Indeed, I consider him quite in the light of a sheep-dog: and there are plenty of wolves prowling about here; I shouldn't feel safe, quite alone."

To which the other replied, with some asperity, that "she didn't believe in nursery-friendships; or in male sheep-dogs of tender age; or in——"

"What *do* you believe in, Aunt Milly?" Marion asked, simply.

This question rather disconcerted the elder

lady; for her articles of faith were, in truth, exceedingly few and vague: before she could collect herself to reply, Marion had flitted on her wilful way.

But with the other monitress it fared very differently. There had never been much love between the sisters-in-law. Lady Rainscliffe was a thorough Charteris—staid, solemn, and intensely respectable; her temper, that had never been serene, was embittered by protracted ill-health. She had disapproved of her brother's marriage from the first, and had not scrupled to express her opinions openly; neither—upon the rare occasions of their meeting—had she shown any disposition to conciliate the fair stranger. It must be owned that the tone of her remonstrance, now, was rather judicial and menacing; and too full of allusions to 'peril of family honour.'

Marion stood and listened, with half-averted head—so patiently, that the other began to be proud of the unwholesome terror inspired by the elaborated oration: but, as the last syllable was spoken, she turned and looked Lady Rainscliffe

full in the face—the pupils of her deep-grey eyes darkening, as was their wont when she was bitterly angered.

"Did my husband leave you any commission, to watch or to school me?" she asked, with an ominous calmness.

The other was so surprised, at overt defiance where she had expected submission, that she could hardly put into words an indignant disclaimer.

"I am glad of it"—Marion went on, just as quietly. "Glad for John's sake, as well as my own. We have never had an angry word since we were married. Perhaps you did not know that? We have seen you so seldom at Charteris Royal." (She smiled, as her antagonist winced under the stab. Her brother's fancied estrangement, which she always imputed to Marion, was one of Lady Rainscliffe's heaviest crosses.) "So, I understand, you have spoken entirely on your own authority? I shall not stoop to defend myself, or deny anything. I dare say the 'family honour' is just as dear to me as it is to you. I

have my children to consider, as well as myself, you know." (Stab the second: the other's marriage-bed was barren.) "But, if you think it is not safe in my hands, you had better write to John and tell him so. I won't bear malice for what you have said, now; I suppose you spoke according to your own ideas of duty. But I cannot thank you: if you had meant kindly, you would have spoken in another tone. I will never listen to another word on this subject: it will be best, that we should both forget it has been opened at all."

As Marion swept from the room—with head erect and neck wreathed superbly, like a queen declining to plead before a vulgar tribunal—astonishment, rather than wrath, kept the other silent. Could that haughty woman—with her imperial defiance and disdain—ever have been the wild Irish girl whom she had looked down upon for years, with a contemptuous dislike, as a pretty wayward poppet, at the best?

Strict and austere, and often-times uncharitable, Lady Rainscliffe was not vindictive. Con-

viction somehow crept over her that, through all her reckless coquetry, Marion was clear of guilt either in fact or intention: having once realised this, she abandoned all idea of writing to her brother. She knew what incurable misery has often been wrought by such tale-bearing—there are trees that wither away utterly, if their bark be once rudely rent away—and Lady Rainscliffe was too just, if not too generous, to incur such fearful risk, to avenge her own affronted pride. There never could be cordiality betwixt them; but it is doubtful if she did not like her sister-in-law better than before, when the first burst of her temper had passed.

Cannot you fancy the capital, that a finished coquette would make out of these two passages-of-arms, when narrating them to her supposed fellow-culprit? Some of these ingenious young females have a knack of amplifying the proportions, and disguising the substance, of a simple offering of millet and honey, till there seems to issue therefrom the unctuous reek of a hecatomb.

It is so pleasant to be able to say to a servitor, on the point of 'striking' for higher wages—

"See what I have undergone—for you."

Uttered low and plaintively, and aided by a judicious amount of eye-play, this talisman will rarely fail in bringing back rebellious spirits to their allegiance.

Mrs. Charteris had other sops too at hand, wherewith to pacify her Azor, when he grew fractious and growled over-loud. Like all other men of his stamp, Flemyng was much given to small causeless jealousies.

Marion knew right well, how to turn this weakness to account. She would get up a mild by-flirtation; and carry it on till Vincent began to sulk, and finally, to upbraid. Then would ensue a scene of charming penitence and mock submission; and the offender—

Folding her white hands so meekly—

would accept fair terms of truce; the prime condition being, of course, the dismissal of the obnoxious intruder.

Altogether, it was very "pretty fooling."

Nevertheless, before Easter was past, the lady had grown somewhat weary of her pastime, and of her playmate—if the truth must be told. She was not really sorry when her husband came to fetch her home; not sorry, either, that John hurried her away in such haste (a pet Bill of the Chalkshire landowners was on, immediately after the recess) that the bustle of packing-up scarcely left space for one brief leave-taking.

So, all might have ended harmlessly; and the beleaguered garrison might have marched out, with all the honours of such unholy warfare; leaving no tell-tale trophy in the hands of the assailant. But Mrs. Charteris was too thorough a woman, to leave well alone.

Several of her intimates came down to the Piazza de' Termini, to wish her a last good-speed: amongst these was Vincent Flemyng. Marion was fairly frightened by his white haggard face, and wild hopeless eyes. They haunted her on her journey—there was no chance for one word of private farewell—till, for the first time in her life, she grew remorseful.

Pity—she could not guess, that her stricken swain had been deep in lansquenet, till day broke, and he dared tempt evil fortune no further. The 'red gold,' whose loss troubled him most, just then, was not, I dare aver, that which shimmered in her glorious tresses; and cheeks are blanched by late hours, not less rapidly than by thwarted love.

Such a knowledge would have saved Marion from an unpardonable folly. Acting on her first impulse, she employed her first available moments of solitude, in writing to Flemyng.

She had done this before; and divers notelets had fluttered his way, during the Roman philanderings; but there was nothing seriously compromising in any of these: moreover, she relied implicitly on his repeated assurance, that every scrap of her handwriting was burnt as soon as it was read: with all her little wiles and coquettish stratagems, she was herself utterly incapable of a deliberate falsehood; and it was about the last thing she suspected in others.

This letter was very different. It was not

exactly criminal; because the writer had no positive guilt to confess or imply: but many a sinner, to whom marriage-vows are a mockery, would have expressed herself less rashly and unguardedly: it was such a letter as few wives would see in their husbands' hands, without feeling faint with fear and shame—such as few mothers would hear read in their children's ears, without a wish that the earth would open, to swallow up them and their dishonour.

A score of times, at least, during the week after that precious epistle had been posted, did poor Marion wish it recalled. She wished it—having perfect trust in the faith and discretion of the man to whom it was addressed. The punishment would almost have equalled the offence, if she could have seen the crafty satisfaction, succeed the first look of surprise on Vincent Flemyng's face, as he read every line twice carefully over; and then locked up the letter in the inmost recess of a dispatch-box, that held other ensamples of the same handwriting; muttering half aloud—

"I must win, the next time we play. She'll never trump *that* card."

With all these Platonic diversions and distractions, it is easy to conceive how Vincent's studies must have languished. To any conversant with such matters, it will be needless to say that the fair Cause herself was first and foremost in upbraiding the truant.

"I positively will not have you come out, tomorrow, till you have done such and such an amount of work."

Ah, comrade of mine! Have not we, in our time, heard words like these? And do we not know, pretty well, what such prohibitions are worth?

Overnight, we bow the head, and murmur submission. But the morrow breaks bright and breezy; the very day for making mirth, or making hay, or making—never mind what else. Flesh is frail; too frail for self-sacrifice, just now. We will work double-tides, when skies begin to lower; let us take our pleasure a-field, whilst they are cloudless. 'Art is long; Life is short'—quotha?

Then Art can the better afford to wait. So

> Black Bayard from the stable bring;
> The rain is o'er, the winds are down.

No other, this blithe morning, shall ride at our bonnibell's bridle-rein.

When we came into the presence of our mistress and monitress, were her brows bent very menacingly? I trow not. Just a semblance of surprise, perhaps—or a shake of the head, more saucy than reproachful—then came the sweetest smile, that condoned the offence, and gave absolution in full.

All through those weeks of idlesse, Flemyng had nourished vague resolutious of buckling to work in earnest, so soon as Mrs. Charteris should have departed. When this happened, he did make some such effort. But the mind, no more than the body, is to be relied on, when it is once thoroughly unstrung; there is a time when energetic action ceases to be a matter of will.

You remember, the favourite theme of Scandinavian legends: how the valiant Sea-King went on from conquest to conquest, making sport of

toil and peril in the hardihood of his might; till he fell under the spell of some lovely witch-lady; in whose lap he lay, till his stark sinewy limbs grew round and enervate, and his brown brawny hands soft and womanly white: how, when the charm was broken at the last, he donned his rusted armour, and went forth to do battle as of afore-time; but, finding that his strength had become as nought, came to a shameful end. Such stories repeat themselves, infinitely often, in every century of the world's history; rarely, even in a cycle of ages, does the prowess of Sardanapalus startle friends and foes.

The parallel holds terribly true with those, whose life-battle has to be fought out with dexterity of hand or brain; and so Vincent Flemyng found it.

It is not likely, that, even with steady labour, he would ever have achieved any great eminence, as a painter. There was a weak washy 'prettiness,' about his best efforts, more discouraging to his master, than crudeness of conception, or coarseness of colouring. There was no *substance*

to improve; a fatal—'thus far and no farther'—stamp, was set upon each and every one of Vincent's most ambitious tentatives. If he was no favourite with his fellow-students, it is certain that no professional envy lay at the bottom of his unpopularity.

Unpopular, he unquestionably was. He did not over-awe his associates in the least; or even impress them, as he supposed, with his social superiority; the honest fellows were simply bored by his mannerisms and affectations. Most of them had been brought into contact—more or less familiar—with Britons of infinitely higher rank than Flemyng could pretend to; they had no democratic prejudices against the 'Swell' *pur et simple*. A man was just as welcome at their club, coming thither in his evening armour, straight from the saloons of the Doria, as if the dust of a grimy studio lingered on his raiment and unwashen hands. It was merely a question of doffing the 'white-choker'—metaphorically if not literally—and making oneself at home. But, to neither the one nor the other of these things,

could Flemyng condescend. Naturally enough, the circle of his intimates narrowed daily: he wearied the patience even of those who would have petted a quarrelsome cur, that had been owned by Vesey Ferrars: as the spring advanced, the only familiars that were left him, were certain members of the English Club; the connecting link being a common devotion to high play.

Vincent began to feel much the same disgust for Rome as he had done for Oxford, after his discomfiture in the schools: but, for many reasons, it did not suit him to return to England, just yet. He would have been half ashamed to confess, that he had given up his new profession, on such brief trial: besides this there were certain creditors at home, whom he did not wish to face, till his finances were more flourishing.

He wandered about Lombardy and Piedmont, in a desultory purposeless fashion, through the summer; sketching a little now and then; but not pretending to do any earnest work. He would attach himself, for a day or two, to any party of his acquaintance that he chanced to meet,

and quit them just as capriciously. During this time, he wrote not unfrequently to Mrs. Charteris, and she was weak enough to reply regularly; though she never again committed herself, as she had done in that one unhappy letter. But he had become so remiss in his communication with Warleigh, that even Kate grew weary of the one-sided correspondence; and Mrs. Flemyng found it hard to excuse her boy even to herself. In the beginning of autumn, Vincent came across a college-friend who was preparing for a start up the Nile: very little persuasion was needed to induce him to join the party.

That languid mock-travel was exactly suited to his character: he was made to lie under an awning, and quote scraps of dead languages, between puffs of cigarette-smoke, till the pleasure-trip seemed to assume a certain business-like form, and the least erudite of his companions felt like a scientific explorer.

There let him bide, for awhile. Not often again, while his life shall last, will Vincent Flemyng float on smooth, silent waters.

CHAPTER II.

SHALL OLD ACQUAINTANCE BE FORGOT?

MRS. MASKELYNE'S was a very quiet funeral. It must needs have been so, under the circumstances, even if the poor lady's wishes, to that effect, had not been clearly set down in her brief testament. Amongst the few intimate friends and old retainers, who saw her laid by her husband's side, was Seyton of Warleigh. He was standing by the open vault, when the rites were done—half uncertain, as to whether he should address Maskelyne or no—when the latter touched his arm. The two had not exchanged a word since that night, when Brian was left alone with his dead; for Seyton had joined the simple foot-procession at the hall-door of Mote, without crossing the threshold.

"I want to speak to you"—Brian whispered.

"Will you come to the library? Mr. Nesbitt will be there too." The last-named was the rector of the parish, who had just performed the ceremony.

"I will wait for him," Tom answered; and, when the clergyman was ready, the two walked slowly together across the park; following Brian very closely. They were half-way to the house, before either spoke. Then Seyton broke the silence abruptly.

"You can guess what he wants us for? It is to speak about his wife. Do you know if she is here?"

"I know that she is not," the other said. "I learnt so much last night, accidentally. It is a terrible business, altogether. I wish I saw my way clearly in it, or rather through it. It will be so very awkward for us, when she does come."

It was a cold raw gusty morning; yet the divine looked uncomfortably warm, just then. He was a pious hard-working man, and nervously anxious to leave no duty undone; but sadly deficient in moral courage and worldly wisdom.

He owed everything that he possessed to the Maskelynes: perhaps it was no wonder, if the prospect of a conflict betwixt gratitude and the obligations of his office, fairly appalled him. But Tom Seyton had very little sympathy with trepidations such as these.

"I don't understand you," he said, rather sternly. "Why should there be any doubt or difficulty? If the marriage was properly solemnised, at the proper time, and no previous lightness of life can be proved against Mrs.—Mrs. Maskelyne" (the word seemed to choke him), "there can be no possible reason why my wife, or yours, should not call on her. If it be otherwise, Brian would not venture to present her to either. As to intimacy—you'll use your own discretion, I suppose; as I shall mine."

Though the good parson was somewhat abashed, for the moment, he was certainly comforted by this decisive view of the case. Neither spoke another word till they entered the library together.

Brian Maskelyne was sitting at a table strewn

with papers and open letters, leaning his brow on his hand. He lifted up his face as they came in —such a wan weary face—greeting them mutely; then his head dropped again; and so he sate, for a minute or more. When he began to speak, his eyes were still shaded.

"You may think me unfeeling and unnatural, perhaps, in troubling you with my own affairs, at such a moment. I cannot help that. I do so, because I hold it to be my simple duty. For the wrong I did my dead mother, God will judge me —if He has not done so already. I cannot atone for this, by failing in other duties. I know right well what difficulties are in store for me and mine. It is just for this reason, that I have called in here to-day my parish-priest, and the friend whom my father trusted in, not less than I do. It is about my wife of course, that I would speak. Will you look at these papers?"

It was strange to hear that dull monotonous voice, and formal utterance, issuing from lips scarcely darkened with down; the terrible incongruity struck both the hearers, as they took

the proffered documents, and perused them silently.

They were only two; and simple enough. The first was a marriage-certificate, regularly signed and fully attested; the ceremony having been performed at a suburban church, immediately on Brian's attaining his majority. The other was the affidavit of Anna Maria Standen, spinster; stating that her niece had resided under her roof and sole charge, from the day of her flight from Torrcaster to the eve of the wedding—inclusive.

"The proofs are not full enough, I dare say" —Brian went on, after a pause. "At least, the world might easily find a flaw in them. But they are all I can give. Will they not be sufficient for you? See now—I speak not only as before God, but before my dead mother; for her coffin is not covered yet—I believe my wife to be as pure as she was, when by my father at the altar. Seyton—Tom Seyton—you've known me from my cradle: *you* don't think I am lying?"

His tones rang out boldly—almost wildly—now; and, as he rose to his feet, with flushing

cheeks and sparkling eyes, there shone out on his face an honest chivalry, not unworthy of the race, who—with all their faults and follies—had seldom thoroughly belied their motto—'Do or Die.'

Tom Seyton rose too, quickly; and his hand met Brian's half-way.

"Of course I believe you. I couldn't help it, if I would. And Nesbitt is satisfied too, I know. My wife shall call here, as soon as your doors are open again. That is all I can promise, at present. But Brian—I want three words with you, alone, before I go."

The minister, albeit not over sagacious on such points, had the tact to perceive that the grand principle of—'least said, &c.'—was especially applicable here. It is not necessary to record the set formalities, with which he proceeded to indorse the opinions of the previous speaker; after which—and certain ceremonial condolences—he took his departure, with a mind agreeably lightened of its load.

Not till the door was fairly closed, did either

of the other men open his lips. Then Maskelyne spoke.

"Let me say one word first. She has written her pardon here"—he touched a letter lying before him—"but I hanker to *hear* the words, 'I forgive.' I think I might sleep, if I heard you say them once. She trusted you so fully; and you were with her so nearly to the end, that you might almost speak for her. Won't you try and say those words? Perhaps it is a sick man's fancy; for I feel strangely ill."

"I do forgive heartily"—Seyton answered—"at least, I would, if you had done me the faintest wrong; and that your poor mother did so, no one knows better than I; though Kate gave you her very last message. You must not give way to sick fancies either: you must be man enough, to bear great sorrow—aye and great remorse—as you would bear sharp bodily pain. Besides, you have hard work before you—in many ways—for many a day to come. It seems cruel to speak, as I must speak now: but it would be worse cruelty, to leave misunderstanding behind me. You said

just now—'I had known you from your cradle': that is why I use language, as plain as I should to my own child, if he were of your age, and stood where you stand. Come what may, *you* will always be welcome at Warleigh; and, if you are in any real need of me, you may reckon on me, while I live, either here or elsewhere. And we shall always meet on the old terms, on any neutral ground. But for your wife—it is different." His face darkened visibly.—"She shall have Kate's countenance and mine—if she thinks it worth having—thus far. No one shall speak of her before me, otherwise than is fitting of the woman whom you married fairly and honourably—though in secret. And Kate shall call here, formally, at regular intervals, if you both wish it. But closer intimacy there never can be. I wish—from my heart I wish—that, out of the old friends of your family, we were likely to stand aloof—alone."

Brian looked up at the speaker, rather piteously than angrily.

"Do you mean that I am likely to lose them all?"

There was a full minute's pause; then the low steady answer came.

"Such as come often here, will have loved your mother—less than I did."

I have said before, that some of Tom Seyton's abrupt home-truths were apt to cut deeper than if they had been aimed in malice: so it was now. At the last word Brian Maskelyne sank backward into the chair behind him, burying his face in his hands once more, with a scarcely repressed groan. When he looked up, his long black eye-lashes were wet. God help him! With guilt and troubles and responsibilities enough on his shoulders to crush a strong wise man, he was but a boy in many ways, after all.

"There never can be strife between us; I know that much," he said. "See—even now, I can thank you for what you have done: aye—and for what you have promised to do. But I can't speak of these things any more, to-day. Perhaps I shall be better, when I'm alone. Won't you come over, and help me through this business that makes my head whirl, to-morrow or next

day? I shall be quite alone till I go up to town."

Tom assented readily; and soon after went his way. He spent most of the two following days at Mote. During that time, not a word was interchanged, on any save business-topics. But, as Seyton stood on the hall-steps bidding Brian good-by, the other detained his hand, whilst he spoke slowly and reluctantly, as though urged on by some inward prompting, that he would fain have repressed.

"One word before I go. I didn't like your look, when you first mentioned my wife. You know nothing against her, surely? It must have been only my fancy. Tell me it was so: tell me that I am safe—quite safe—in trusting her. By G—d, I should go mad, if I did not feel sure that all her heart and love is mine, after what she has cost me."

Seyton shook himself clear of the earnest grasp, with a kind of abrupt energy.

"What puts such ideas into your brain?" he said almost roughly. "It will soon wear itself

out, at this rate. I know—absolutely nothing. Will that satisfy you? Now, good-by. You're almost late as it is."

As he watched Brian drive away, Seyton felt something like the self-reproach of an honest man, who—for good and sufficient reasons—has withheld part of the truth that he might have told. He *knew* nothing, certainly: yet vague rumours—the first faint smoke-wreaths from a smouldering fire—had reached him, not over favourable to the fair fame of the beautiful bride: his own inward convictions—prejudices, if you will—spoke still more plainly. Not to mince matters—Tom felt assured that, though she might succeed in hoodwinking the world, and her husband, to her life's end, Bessie Maskelyne was little better than the worst of her sex at heart.

Most people, I think, would allow that he was justified in holding his peace. It would sadly disturb the equilibrium of society, if such candid opinions were often laid upon the altar even of hereditary friendship.

CHAPTER III.

AT HOME.

We need not linger over the triumphs of the Standen party, when they knew that the grand prize was fairly within their grasp, without let, hindrance, or deduction. There may be something picturesque in the swoop of the *rapacidæ;* they are but a sorry sight, as they sit, flapping their pinions over the quarry before the battening begins.

It is hardly fair, though, to apply this simile to Bessie Maskelyne at Mote. It would have been well, if all her impulses had been as blameless and natural, as that which caused her pulse to bound exultingly, as she roved through the long gilded galleries and gorgeous saloons of her new home; finding it deliciously difficult to realise the truth, that she was absolute mistress

of all. Of all—with a very trifling exception. Of the rooms that had been specially his mother's, Brian kept the keys; and no one but himself was allowed to cross their thresholds. Bessie troubled herself very little about this whim; indeed—so far as her husband was concerned—she was not likely to be jealous either of the living or the dead.

For some time, the two were entirely alone, at Mote. As the excitement and novelty wore off, the lady's restless spirit began to chafe under the splendid monotony that she had once thought so enviable; and she became subject to occasional fits of rather decided petulance. Brian was everything that was kind, certainly; he seemed fonder of her every day; and was always ready to attend her whithersoever she fancied to wander, on foot, in carriage, or in saddle. But he had by no means shaken off what Bessie—more forcibly than elegantly—called "the mopes." It provoked her sometimes, to see how listlessly—almost despondingly indeed—he would shake his head, when she ventured on any speculation,

as to 'when people would begin to call, &c.': the best interpretation to be put upon his manner, was, that he thought it too soon to speak of such things, as yet.

Before the days of mourning expired, Marlshire had had ample leisure to discuss the terms, on which the new dynasty at Mote ought to be received.

It was rather a puzzling question to most people. There was no solid reason, for keeping Mrs. Maskelyne without the pale. Both the squire of Warleigh, and the rector of Motesbury, were in a position to affirm that the marriage had been perfectly regular, albeit clandestine—the inducement to secrecy being palpable—and that there were not the faintest grounds for imputation of ante-nuptial frailty. The lady's parentage was objectionable, of course; but not a whit more so than that of several dames, who had gradually made their way into the inner circle of Marlshire society, after hovering awhile on its verge. Besides all this, it was notorious that poor Emily Maskelyne had—however reluc-

tantly—ratified Brian's choice, before she died. This last point, Bessie's advocates made their battle-horse; and they rode it to the front, upon every possible occasion.

But the other side argued, that a consent, extorted as it were *in articulo mortis*, was invalid in Social Law. Moreover, they pointed the finger of scorn at the testimony of Anna Maria Standen, spinster; alleging that such a witness was wholly undeserving of credit; so that an awkward interval, really, remained to be accounted for. With these stern casuists Brian's own assertions went for nothing; for—said they—a husband's evidence, in such a case, is no more to be received, than a wife's in an ordinary Criminal Court. The gist of the whole argument came to this—that Jem Standen's daughter was not entitled to the benefit of a doubt.

The disputants soon ranged themselves, formally, into bands.

Lady Peverell—finding that, by a rare chance, the feeling of the county was likely to be with her, when she wished to make herself disagree-

able—set her austere face against Mote, like a very flint-stone; and took her stand upon the bold ground of—'cut, without compromise.'

As a matter of course, La Reine Gaillarde headed the opposite faction. The instant she heard what line her ancient antagonist had adopted, she announced her own intentions of calling on the bride, as soon as the decencies of mourning would allow; and of 'taking her up, if she turned out well.' On which, the elder dame retorted—letting off the steam of a virtuous high-pressure with a snort, wrathful and resonant—'That she had long ceased to be surprised, at anything Lady Laura Brancepeth might say or do.'

And so matters remained, for awhile.

Both parties were naturally anxious to enlist the Seytons on their side; or, at the least, to have the advantage of their opinion. But Seyton utterly declined to enter into the merits of the case; merely saying that, 'they should call, of course;' and Kate, even with her intimates, only committed herself to the avowal that, 'she should

do exactly as Tom told her.' The subject was so evidently painful to both of them, that the most inveterate busy-body shrank from pressing it.

The *châtelaine* of Brancepeth kept her word: her ponies came spinning up the elm-avenue, two days after it became known, that the doors of Mote were open to the world again. Truth to say—she was rather disappointed with her visit.

All her courage and self-possession—she had plenty of both—could not enable Mrs. Maskelyne to appear in her right place, whilst she did the honours of her new home. She might have fared better, perhaps, with Brian by her side; but he chanced to be out; so she had to bear the brunt of the interview as best she might. She was clever enough to know, that she was not playing her part well; and this provoked her, intensely; for she would have given a year of life, to have sent that especial visitor away, with a favourable impression: the effort to seem at her ease made her manner bold, almost defiant. No wonder that the other, who—with all her reckless independence—was *grande dame* to the

tip of her dainty finger, felt the conviction grow, every instant, stronger, that there never could be any sympathy betwixt herself and the superb *roturière.*

"It's a great pity, my dear," she said,—making her moan to a confidante. "I wanted so much to take her up, if it was only to vex Grimalkin." (So, she feared not to speak of the august Peverell.) "But it won't do. She'll never suit us: I can see that. Somehow—I don't think she's honest; and there's a perpetual self-assertion about her that no nerves can stand."

Neither was Bessie's first interview with Mrs. Seyton much more successful; though, here, the fault was not all on her side. Indeed, an old friend might have been puzzled to recognise merry, frank-spoken Kate, in that sedate personage, dropping one decorous common-place after another, like one who repeats a set wearisome lesson. Perhaps Mrs. Maskelyne was not wholly unjustified, in afterwards characterising her visitor, in her own forcible language, as—"stiff and frumpish."

On this occasion, Brian was present. But he was too nervous, to be of much use in making things go off, more smoothly and pleasantly.

Much more bitterly would Bessie Maskelyne have chafed, if she could have guessed at the struggle and constraint, with which Kate Seyton forced herself to sit out her appointed half-hour. Something near akin to loathing sprang up in her gentle nature as she looked on the usurper, enthroned—audacious, triumphant—in the seat of her who had sunk so lately under shame and sorrow. The very mourning, that could not tone down the splendour of Bessie's gorgeous beauty, seemed a mockery and insult. With the gleaming blue eyes before her, and the clear ringing voice —not always subdued enough—in her ears, Kate's thoughts went back to a sweet pale face, that once lay so close to her own, whilst the weak lips whispered—

"Kiss my own boy—for me—my poor boy."

With all this in her mind—and more—she would have been no true woman, had she forced herself to be cordial. It was no wonder that

these two should have parted, for the first time, in mutual distrust and dislike.

Mrs. Maskelyne, it must be confessed, was not always so unlucky. As she grew more settled in her fresh dignity, much of the awkwardness above alluded to passed off, and certain asperities of manner were quite smoothed away. Some of her visitors—especially of the male sex—were too dazzled by her personal attractions, to be very critical; they thought how superb she would look, presiding at one of the great entertainments for which Mote used once to be famous, but which had been much less frequent of late years: seen at the end of a pleasant festive vista, Bessie Maskelyne, to such eyes, appeared well nigh faultless.

But none of these last-named adherents were of importance enough, to turn the scale of the county's verdict. It must be owned, that this was unfavourable by a considerable majority of votes: indeed, after being as it were set, for some months, on her trial, neutrality was about all that Brian's wife could fairly reckon upon.

He did not try to delude himself, either as to her position, or his own: truly, hardly a day passed, without giving him reason to remember certain words, spoken by Tom Seyton on the morning of the funeral. Few, indeed, of the old friends of the family crossed the threshold of Mote, after the first formal call; moreover, when he met such accidentally, he fancied—it could scarcely be fancy—that there was on their faces a cold reserve; or, sometimes, a pity yet harder to bear.

Realising all this—did he once repent his marriage, or begrudge its cost? Not once, I dare aver. Though remorse for the sorrow he had brought on his dead mother haunted him still, like a ghost, he bore his burden alone; and never thought of making Bessie an accomplice in that mortal sin. Nay—each visible sign of the world's avoidance, drew him closer to his fair wife's side; till even her hard hollow nature began to be touched by the delicate tenderness, that never slept or slackened.

Before very long, Mr. Standen put in an ap-

pearance at Mote—invited specially, by Brian; for Bessie never troubled herself to make a suggestion on the subject.

However jubilant he might have felt at heart, he made his entry, by no means with flaunt of colours, or beat of drum. That same *relligio loci*, which overcame him on his first visit, possessed him again, directly he had passed the ponderous portals. Every one knows the faint antique half-aromatic fragrance, which pervades old halls, hung with mouldering trophies of chase or war. To most nostrils it comes, gratefully enough; but it weighed down Mr. Standen's lungs, like the fumes of strong incense.

He responded to his son-in-law's greeting with much deference and ceremony. The lord of Mote and its broad acres, was a very different personage from the penniless refugee, over whose head hung the sword of disinheritance.

"If you'll put me in some out of the way corner, I shan't trouble you, much"—he said, meekly. But he was hugely delighted, when he was shown the apartments prepared for him.

They were three pleasant rooms enough, in a remote wing, looking on the one side over the park, on the other into the stable-quadrangle. Bessie had selected them, herself; and she deigned to express a hope, that her parent would 'make himself at home' there. He did so, thoroughly, after a while; but, for all practical purposes, he might as well have been located a league away from the house. He soon found out that 'late hours didn't always suit him;' and petitioned to be allowed to dine, occasionally, in his own rooms and at his own time. The fact was, that he could neither eat nor drink in comfort, in the presence of the Butler—an elder of venerable presence, who was in the habit of 'fixing' Mr. Standen with solemn questioning eyes. He preferred being ministered unto by one of the under-footmen, set specially apart for that service, with whom he could prattle affably during meals; pleasing himself the while with the idea, that he was 'condescending.'

Ere long, he was on terms of confidential familiarity with the head-coachman, who—albeit

intensely respectable—had for many years made the Racing Calendar his favourite study. It was quite a sight, to see those two, conning over the handicaps, and 'spotting' probable 'good things'—grave and authoritative, as Cabinet Councillors.

Jem Standen rarely ventured to race-meetings, now; and did all his betting by commission. He had grown much shakier, of late; and the roaring turmoil of the Ring bewildered him, though he was familiar with its every sound. Indeed, the poor old Silenus was rapidly becoming incapable of harming any one—but himself. He still drank hard of nights; but, as it was always in solitude, none, but the purveyor of his liquor, knew *how* hard. He would creep out, on sunny afternoons, on the back of a sober hack, and dawdle about the woodland rides; rarely going beyond the demesne-walls; halting whenever he came to a good point of view, to mutter to himself—with a weak vacuous chuckle—

"All Bessie's—every stick and stone of 'em—Bessie's."

But he was happy enough—happier than he had ever been in his disreputable life—and, perhaps, quite as inoffensive as any crapulous eremite of ancient time.

Twice or thrice, Maskelyne was compelled to go to town on business; and Bessie bore him company. On each of these occasions, Kit Daventry called on them; beyond these formalities, no intercourse was kept up with him—so far as Brian knew. He did not think it necessary to honour all his wife's relations; and the Lawyer was not pressed to pay an early visit.

Indeed, a year and more passed away, before that dark handsome face showed itself at Mote.

CHAPTER IV.

NEVE TU SPERNE CHOREAS.

A LONG vaulted hall, over-narrow for fair proportion, and made narrower still by the side-rows of quaint old pillars supporting the dusky roof; somewhat clumsily, though gaudily, decorated; and very tryingly lighted with a line of tiny gas-jets running round the cornice, and a huge centre chandelier; the floor far from unexceptionable; for no amount of hard rubbing can efface the dents of nailed shoon, left from the last farmers'-meeting held in the Town Hall of Torrcaster.

There is a provincial air about the whole presence-chamber, which surely does not extend to the company there assembled. For, at certain seasons, the great families of two counties emulate each other in striving to fill it becomingly;

and over the uneven flooring glide, as lightly as they may, many feet familiar with Palace *parquets*. The good folk in those parts are very proud of these gatherings ; and distance and weather on such occasions become as things of naught. Delicate dames who, in the midst of the season, are apt to wax plaintive over the necessity of attending some entertainment in the south-western precincts of Belgravia, will gather their party together quite cheerfully for a ten-mile drive through the cold, when the object is one of the Torrcaster balls. They are pleasant enough, too, to tempt many strangers to repeat their visit as often as they can get the chance; so that not a few of such faces are as well-known in the Town Hall as those of the native gentles.

It is about the noon of night; and people are settling to their work, or play, in earnest. The best men have got through nearly all their duty-dances by this time; and have leisure to think of their private and selfish interests. Divers tablets are crowded already with those mysterious hierogly-

phics that leave so much room for feminine diplomacy: for sometimes they seem like the Median code—at others, as if written on flowing water.

Several of our acquaintances are to the fore, you see. You have time for a long glance round before the next waltz begins.

There is Blanche Ellerslie in her favourite corner, somewhat in the shadow of the pillar; though a gleam of light falls athwart one side of the demure, dainty head bent down, just now, in pensive languor. She has made good use of her time already, and wild work with the heart of the stalwart cavalier who stands by her side, speaking at intervals in brief energetic whispers; never relaxing the while the voracious gaze of his fierce glittering eyes.

Vereker Vane has commanded these five years past that famous light-cavalry corps—The Princess's Own Prancers. He is one of the best tacticians in the service, though very young for his grade; and has invented several new manœuvres, so extraordinarily difficult, not to say dan-

gerous, of execution, that a certain Prussian General was moved almost to tears of envy, when they were gone through for his especial benefit. Vane is a bitter martinet on parade, but the cheeriest of all convivialists in the mess-room, and elsewhere; indeed, some anxious mothers of cornets have said, that it would be well if the Colonel did not promote revelry quite so much, both by precept and example. For some of the boys are rather a sorry sight of a morning; while the effects of late hours and deep drinking are thrown off from his cast-steel constitution, like rain-drops from a covering of water-proof.

Yet it is easy to see that Vereker Vane has lived all the days of his life; his handsome face is neither haggard nor drawn, but the hard battered look about it tells its own tale. He is apt to be somewhat abrupt and overbearing, even in the making of love; indeed the gallant's amours have hitherto been mostly of a facile, not to say, venal description. The fortresses he would have stormed opened their gates before the first trumpet had done sounding; and

the fruit that he plucked would have been overripe for most tastes.

After this brief sketch, you will guess, perhaps, what chance the poor *Sabreur* will have in the white, lissom hands of Blanche Ellerslie.

Standing somewhat aloof, and watching the proceedings of his superior with amused appreciation on his broad comical face, is another ornament of the same corps; known all over England as — "Daddy Goring." He got that sobriquet—no man knows how or why—within a week after he joined, and it has stuck to him ever since. There is nothing truculent, or even martial, about his appearance. Round and rubicund as a full-blown abbot, he was born for one especial office—that of a Master of Revels. Of a truth, he radiates conviviality wheresoever he goes; at any symposium he seems out of place, elsewhere than in the presidential chair; strangers have been known to come into his presence morose and morbid, and to depart more than decently merry, exhilarated not by strong liquor, but solely by the jovial contagion. No amount

of ill-luck, or contrariety of circumstances, has ever been able seriously to disturb his glorious self-complacency, or to abate the flow of a rich Rabelaisian humour; he laughs at love, as at all other earthly troubles; and the women like him never a whit the worse.

Daddy Goring is a favoured guest in all manner of mansions; and can accommodate himself to his society, with marvellous facility and unerring tact. Perhaps he himself prefers the free-and-easy style; but his 'company-manners' fit him like a glove; and he seems not less at his ease whilst singing a second to Violet Pendragon, than when his deep sonorous voice trolls out one of those equivocal ditties that solace the small hours of our militant youth. It is an acolastic sort of life, to be sure; but, were anything to befall that stout bacchanalian, a wider social blank would ensue than would be left by many sour-visaged Solomons.

Others too are watching the pair; amongst them Lady Laura Brancepeth, who is somewhat aggrieved by their proceedings. Vereker Vane

is just the sort of cavalier that she likes to enrol in her own body-guard, the standard of which is somewhat higher than that of the Household Cavalry; for La Reine Gaillarde—herself of superb stature—will abide no dwarfish courtiers. So, with no serious designs on his peace of mind, she chafes none the less at seeing him entirely engrossed by the dangerous widow. One of her intimates, reading her feelings aright, whispers with provocative intent,—

"*La belle* Blanche is playing her little game again, I perceive. How quiet she is over it, too!"

To which the Lady Laura responds—biting her scarlet lips angrily—that—

"Still waters never run straight."

She has a terrible knack at *travestie* of proverbs, and has occasionally scandalised society not a little by her misquotations; though no one can help laughing at them. Such as overhear, laugh now, of course; and the culprit herself joins in it, quite heartily: her shortlived vexation has almost vanished, before ten bars of her fa-

vourite waltz have been played. She will be worth looking at, a few seconds later, when she swirls past Lady Peverell—going best pace with a partner willing and able to breathe her—yet not so fast, but that she finds time to flash back over her shoulder a merry defiance, in answer to the other's scowl.

Chalkshire is almost as effectively represented on these occasions as Marlshire itself: from the first-named county several large parties have come in; the largest of all, from Charteris Royal. Marion is in brilliant beauty to-night; but she does not seem in her wonted high spirits; a nervous worried look creeps out on her face at times; and a certain abruptness of gesture betrays some inward annoyance or care. This is observable even whilst she is conversing most animatedly with the fortunate cavalier, who stands, very evidently, highest in her favour, just now—a tall dark man; with hair and beard trimmed after a foreign fashion; and features decidedly attractive in spite of the utter languor that pervades them, and broods in the large sleepy eyes.

Lord Ranksborough is rather a remarkable person in his way; if it were only for the curious contradictions in his temperament. There never was born a lazier or more perfectly imperturbable creature. He had never deigned to seek, seriously, a help meet for him—indeed he was scarcely quoted in the marriage-market now—and was rather too prone to divert his loneliness by other men's fire-sides. Though he had never yet been a partner in any fatal misdemeanour, he had an unhappy talent for compromising the objects of his admiration. But even these flirtations he conducted in a serene impassive fashion; dropping a low earnest word now and then, with the air of one who lays a priceless pearl at his mistress' feet; and filling up all blanks and pauses with the eloquence of his practised eyes.

Strangers, looking on Ranksborough for the first time, thought it a jest, when they were told that he was one of the very hardest men over a country that ever sat in saddle; and that seldom has fleeter or stauncher stalker dealt death among the deer. It was strange to see, how he

would pass from a state of complete repose to the extremes of physical exertion; and relapse again, rapidly as an unstrung bow.

It may be, that these contrasts in his character invested the man with a certain attraction and interest. For he was very popular in his own set; and womankind seemed to find more fascination in his listless homage than in the assiduous devotion of others. It was evident enough to-night, that Marion Charteris was a willing and heedful listener. Yet, as was aforesaid, her glances would wander occasionally—always in the same direction—with the vexed impatient expression of one fretting under the vigilance of a third person's eyes.

If you follow those glances, they will lead you straight to the corner, where, half masqued by a pillar, stands Vincent Flemyng; with jealous wrath written in every line of his lowering brow.

He is a good deal changed since you saw him last,—scarcely for the better. That long Vandyke beard, which he is gnawing so savagely just now, is picturesque certainly; but it does not suit

his peculiar style of face; moreover a sullen distrustful look has settled down there, almost more unpleasant than the old superciliousness. It is hard not to believe that the man would be capable of much that was base and bad, if he once got thoroughly vicious.

He has only been back in England about a week; and this is his first meeting with Marion. He had received one brief note, begging him not to call at Charteris Royal—for reasons hereafter to be explained—till after the Torrcaster ball. The explanation had not come yet; for he had barely had the opportunity of a hurried passing greeting, as she swept in, in the midst of her party, leaning on Ranksborough's arm; whose support she seemed rather loth to abandon. He might, of course, have joined the group that—constantly changing its atoms—surrounded Marion, wherever she chanced to linger; but this did not suit Flemyng's purpose: scattered crumbs of conversation were not likely to satisfy him, after so long a fast. So he stood aloof, nursing his anger moodily; scarcely deigning to

reply to salutation or question; watching ever for such penitential signals, as were wont to pacify him, long ago, in Rome. But now, the dark grey eyes had no message for him.

About this time, something that he saw—or fancied he saw—overcame the last faint promptings of prudence and patience: he walked with a quick decided step towards the spot where Marion was standing,—still engaged in a virtual *tête-à-tête*, though the throng brushed her ample skirts on passing. There are fair recluses, who can create for themselves, and one other, a convenient solitude in the inmost heart of a crowd.

Now Vincent was guilty of a gross error in generalship, even before entering into action.

> O, pretty page, whose dimpled chin
> Never hath known the barber's shear;

hearken to the counsel of a senior, tottering on the verge of two-score.

If she in whom you trusted hath shown signs of treachery; or even gone openly over to the enemy's camp, and you think to bring her back *à main armée*, be cunning, I pray you, in choosing

the season of your onslaught. If you cannot catch the fair renegade walking alone—like Alp on the moon-lit shore—let the attack be made at any other moment, rather than when your rival is her only protector, and must, perforce, judge the combat, if he do not draw and strike in.

Nor was this Vincent's only mistake. The first words of one who, without sufficient warrant, troubles confidential converse, should, at least, be guardedly courteous and deferential: Flemyng's were neither.

"You can spare me this waltz, I know?"

The faintest note of interrogation would express all the question that was conveyed; indeed, there was a familiar assumption of authority that, under the circumstances, bordered nearly on insolence. Ranksborough's slumbrous eyes opened, broad and black, on the intruder in haughty astonishment; while Marion's cheek flushed, painfully, with vexation and shame. Her lips were sharply compressed for a second or two, as if she had some difficulty in repressing her first impulse to speak: had she obeyed it, Vincent Flemyng's

vanity—tenacious as it was—would hardly have survived the shock. I don't mean, that she would have answered the discourteous according to his discourtesy; she could easily have retorted with one of those graceful rapier thrusts that, in all ages, have proved far more deadly than even the slash of two-handed swords.

But, with all her recklessness, poor Marion knew right well—though she knew not all—that it would never do to push matters to extremity just now; it was necessary to temporize, if only to quiet the suspicions that she saw gleaming under Ranksborough's arching brows: she had not been so much interested in any capture for a long time; it would be too hard to lose her hart-royal when he seemed fairly in the toils. If she could command her voice, she could not quite command her Irish eyes: they shot out one natural glance—only one; then the long lashes drooped; and, when they rose again, the eyes, too, were schooled. But, if to the 'white witches' of our day were given Canidia's power, of withering with a look, Vincent Flemyng would have felt

a curious sensation in the very marrow of his bones. Yet was not her laugh unmusical, as she made answer.

"I must spare you one turn, for old acquaintance sake, though I don't mean to dance much to-night; and travellers have privileges, too. But you need not have made so sure of it, beforehand. That comes of smoking pipes with pachas, whom 'to hear is to obey.'"

As she laid her hand on Vincent's arm, she turned on Ranksborough the prettiest pleading look: words could not have expressed more plainly.—"I had better humour this fractious child. Be patient: I shall not be very long away."

And Ranksborough—a passed interpreter of such language—bowed his head gently; whilst his lips rather intimated than syllabled,—

"*Ne vous gênez pas.*"

The disgraced favourite was utterly unconscious of that rapid interchange of signals; but his tone was sufficiently sullen, as he murmured,—

"I suppose I ought to apologise for taking you out of such pleasant company, even for a few minutes. It is worth being absent for two years, to come back and find oneself so welcome."

"Nonsense!" she retorted, pettishly. "You know, very well, that there's nothing to apologise for; unless it is for that absurd confidential fashion of addressing me before an utter stranger."

"No stranger to *you*, Madonna, at least. I can guess now why it was better I should keep away from Charteris Royal."

Marion half withdrew her hand from the arm on which it leant—far more lightly than in the olden time.

"You *will* not allow one to be glad, you are home again. It is such up-hill work, pacifying you suspicious people! My reasons were simple enough. The Cardales were staying with us. You know what a *mauvaise langue* hers is; and she don't like me. She made up a whole book of fables about my goings on in Rome; and a few of them are not forgotten yet. I really

couldn't afford to give her a chance of publishing a second edition. They have gossiped quite enough, in these parts, as it is.

Flemyng made no answer. They were walking then beyond the line of pillars, and near the lower end of the hall, which was comparatively deserted. Looking up into his face, Marion saw an evil smile dwelling on his lip, that made her feel vaguely uncomfortable.

"What are you thinking of?" she asked, impatiently. "I do wish you would speak out."

"I was thinking," the other said, "how very prudent and provident you had become of late—how much more prudent, than when you posted that charming letter from Genoa. I was reading it over only late last night—a sort of sop to stay one's appetite, you know."

A very bold heart—over-bold said her enemies—beat under Marion Charteris' girdle; but it was as though a frozen hand grasped it now; for several seconds, she felt faint and breathless.

The dim fear that had haunted her, from the very hour, when she had began to repent having

set her hand to such a record of guilty folly, stood before her now, visible and tangible. There was no dissembling the cruel stubborn fact: she lay at the mercy of one, who was not likely to yield an inch of his vantage-ground. For she read only too rightly the malign meaning of the eyes, that belied the assumed carelessness of the speaker's tone. It was a bitter moment for Marion Charteris; bitter enough to have atoned for more than one venial sin. And no darker guilt lay on her conscience: lightly as she seemed to esteem the duties of wife and mother, she had never rendered herself absolutely unworthy of either name; she had given the world a right to speak jestingly of her—no more.

She had no idea how Vincent would use his power: she only knew that he could use it; and the knowledge made her sick at heart. Even her husband's homely figure, that never yet had overawed her fancy, seemed, just now, to assume the austere dignity of judge and avenger; she felt as if she dared not trust herself alone in his presence. She could laugh at these exaggerated

terrors in after days; but, while the fit lasted, it was not so easy to realize its humorous side.

"You—you told me you burnt every line I wrote," she whispered, as soon as she recovered her breath a little. "How could you——"

"*Did* I say so?" the other retorted, with insolent coolness. "We said so many things in those days, that we have forgotten since. There's no rule without an exception. I suppose I made one, in favour of that letter—and a few more. It is quite a model, in its peculiar style; though, I daresay, you could improve on it now: practice makes perfect, of course. I wonder, if others would appreciate it as much as I have done?"

The Irish blood, that never yet counted cost or danger when tyranny was to the fore, surged up in Marion's veins, hot and dauntless. She dropped her tormentor's arm; and looked him fairly in the face, without a sign of submission on her own.

"We have had rather too much of this. I had

hoped we might meet as old friends should. It seems this is not to be, and I must sue for peace. Will you tell me your terms? I've been utterly foolish, of course; but—what would you have me be? I *did* trust your word, Vincent. You had better speak plainly. Vague threats don't frighten me. Am I to understand——"

"This is not the place to talk about terms," Vincent broke in savagely; speaking always in the same smothered undertone. "Only understand, that you are dealing with a man, now, instead of the boy that you fooled so long. I'm older, at all events, if not wiser or better, than when we parted."

Her eyes rested on his face, till, heated as he was by bitter passion, he shivered inwardly under their freezing scorn.

"A man!" she said. "What woman could doubt your manhood, when you give her proofs like these? Do I not treat you with all possible respect? I should hardly say to a boy, 'What is it that you require of your handmaid?' I suppose the first condition is, that you should

have the *entrée* to Charteris Royal. You will do us too much honour, whenever it shall please you to come there."

A little ironical curtsey gave the last finishing-stroke to the mock humility of the defiance. Flemyng was getting very much the worst of the word-play. He felt he must have breathing-space; and this could only be gained by breaking ground. He did so, not ungracefully; indeed, the soft, gradual sadness that overspread his features would have done credit to an abler facial artist.

"At least, do not speak so," he murmured. "I would rather hear you speak angrily, a thousand times. It was my fault for provoking you. I believe I'm half mad to-night. Forget every word I've said yet; and forgive—as you have forgiven before. Can you make no allowances for me—coming back after such an absence, and finding that my place near you is quite filled up? I insist on nothing—far less threaten. Only I should like to come for a little while to Charteris Royal, whenever it suits you perfectly."

Now Marion was not in the least deceived, or thrown off her guard, by this sudden lowering of her adversary's sword. But her woman's wit told her, that it was for her advantage to accept for the moment even that hollow truce; it told her, too, that her best chance of annihilating the proofs of past folly would be found under her own roof. She answered with her old bright mischievous smile,—

"That is better, *beau sire*. It is so stupid for old friends to quarrel. We'll forget and forgive all to-night's hard sayings. Why shouldn't you come to us, next Monday? Some bores will be gone by then; and several great people are coming. Amongst others—no, I won't tell you. It shall be a pleasant surprise. The Roman memories will all vanish when you've once seen *her*. Don't begin to protest. There's no time just now. You asked me to waltz, you know; it would be as well to take three turns, if only for the look of the thing. Besides, I'm curious to see if you've lost my step, out there in the East. Perhaps the Almèh have taught you better ones."

He laughed low to himself—thinking how his strong will had triumphed. The next second, his arm was round her waist; and they were merged in the throng.

CHAPTER V.

A KALEIDOSCOPE.

Even in that whirling eddy, one or two amusing features might present themselves to disinterested observers, like you and me.

If you want an ensample of the miseries of an ill-assorted match, there is one ready to your hand.

Early in the evening, Harry Anstice, a chief-corner-stone of the Marlshire squirearchy—moved thereunto by his evil genius, and by '47 claret—ventured to proffer himself as a partner to Violet Damer, y-clept by her own very fast set 'The Firefly.' The damsel—knowing nothing further of the aspirant, than that he owned many broad acres, and seeing that he was 'a marvellous proper man'—inscribed him on her tablets not unwillingly. Now, Violet has an artist's love for

waltzing; and does it, some people say, almost *too* well for a non-professional. Having quite as keen an eye for matrimonial main-chances as her fellows, she would hardly entrust herself to the heir-apparent of a dukedom—a notoriously 'bad mover'—without making moan over the self-sacrifice. Harry Anstice is but a moderate performer, with all the advantages given in, of abundant elbow-room, and an indulgent partner used to his ways. Ever since he made that rash plunge, he has been haunted with misgivings, lest —having undertaken a task far beyond his power —he should be brought to open shame. These doubts and fears have waxed stronger, as the moment of trial drew nearer; he has been fidgeting about nervously all the evening, too flurried to attempt anything beyond square dances; but, nevertheless, has waxed hot already, more than is becoming.

"I was all in a lather, before I got to the starting-post"—poor Harry said; describing his sensations to his chief confidant.

At last, his courage is brought to the sticking-

point with several agonising turns of the screw; and, clasping his partner's delicate waist with a convulsive energy, he plunges headlong into the whirl, with that blind recklessness which so often accompanies a sinking heart.

Before they have taken five turns, the Firefly recognises the appalling fact that her cavalier is steering wild, and has not the faintest power of regulating his own long vacillating steps, much less of guiding hers, aright; instead of avoiding collisions, by a dexterous side sway, or quick reverse, he blunders on, as if it were the bounden duty of others to clear out of his track—"just like a great White Elephant,"—said the lady afterwards (she had just been reading somebody's Diary in Siam). As a matter of course, both have rather a rough time of it. Now, there is a very dauntless spirit, and tough vitality to boot, within that fragile frame of Violet's; she minds hard knocks in the press of battle as little as any Maid of Orleans or Saragossa; but it is too aggravating, to have to go to the ambulance after a simple field-day, where, for all possible evolu-

tions, there is verge to spare. A sharp word is on her lips, when Harry anticipates her, by staggering back into the outer circle—dizzy and breathless. Yes: actually breathless; though he can do his mile in 5·20 any day, and can walk half the keepers in Marlshire to a stand-still. He can scarcely stammer out some vague "hope that she is not tired;" to which the Firefly responds—

"No, not tired; but——"

Completing the sentence with a quick, upward glance, like a sting, which will rankle long in poor Harry's memory; warning him, let us hope, against meddling with those bright-eyed little town-mice unadvisedly.

Of a very different stamp is that other couple—floating along, smoothly and lightly, as dancers seen in a dream; while solid obstacles of flesh and blood seem to melt out of their path, like bodiless shadows. The pretty blonde with the large, brown, plaintive eyes, is Minnie Carrington; betrothed a month ago with great parental exultation—herself contentedly ac-

quiescing—to the wealthy rector of Mudiford Magna. Her cavalier you may possibly have heard of before. It is no other than Bertie Grenvil.

Things, amatory and financial, have gone rather hard of late with that graceless Cherub; and, according to his custom, he has decided on absence from the scene of action, till the different *embroglie* shall have disentangled themselves. He has come down to the country, with 'a whole carriage-bagful of good resolutions,' as he himself expressed it; and has taken the pledge of total abstinence, as far as love-making of any sort is concerned, for the entirety of his long leave. Truth to say, the goblet that he has drained so often, and more than once foresworn, seems perilously near his lips just now.

Yes, it is a very sympathetic and confidential performance altogether; and exceeding pleasant to look upon to disinterested bystanders, such as you and I. Yet it were better, perchance, if that waltz had never been played.

Better, certainly, for the peace of mind of

yonder rubicund divine, who watches the couple in evident travail of spirit; vowing, doubtless, to himself that measures, short, sharp, and decisive, shall soon be taken with these vanities; and that never again, with his free will, shall his spouse-elect gyrate in the grasp of a godless guardsman; and waxing even hotter in his distemperature, till at last, he feels as truculent as one of the crop-eared chaplains who preached fire and sword against

The bravos of Alsatia, and the pages of Whitehall.

Better, too, for the *langoureuse* Minnie herself; whose dreams may be haunted, for some time to come, with recollections of soft chestnut hair, almost brushing her own tresses; and of a low musical voice, murmuring those broken sentences that form texts for so many after meditations. I doubt if, during the next week at least, she will hear the heavy step of her plethoric affianced, without a guilty shudder of repugnance.

As for that reprobate Cherub—it were folly indeed to waste pity or thought on one who, if

'scuffling' be sin, is surely long past praying for.

There, to the right—a little wide of the throng—goes Vereker Vane; you can guess who his partner is, though his tall figure almost masks her just now. The soldier's face is set, and his eyes are glittering with a sort of fierce eagerness; even so, may have looked some tawny-haired rover in the rough old times—carrying off his beautiful prize through shivering lances, or over angry waters; such an one as the hero of that famous song, in which you seem to hear the swirl of waves, and the whistle of rising winds—

> Like the swift cormorant,
> Who, with broad wings aslant,
> Seeketh some rocky haunt,
> With his prey laden;
> So under mist and rain,
> Beating to sea again,
> Through the wild hurricane,
> Bore I the maiden.

And, in the little quiet face that rests on the stalwart martialist's shoulder, you will read nothing but the trustfulness of weak womanhood,

confiding in her natural protectorate. Yet, I wis it is not hard to discern, which is the stronger and governing spirit of the twain. Omphalè was clever enough in her own benighted day; but she might have learnt a lesson or two, worth all her simple science,—sitting at the tiny feet of Blanche Ellerslie.

One more *croquis*, for old acquaintance sake, before we leave that fair company to their diversions.

Look at Kate Seyton, gliding swiftly and steadily along, supported by the solid right arm of the Major of the Princess's Own.

Alec Turnbull is rather a character. He is far senior to his chief, both in age and length of service; and, some think, is even better in certain points of drill, though not so brilliant a tactician. The ancient family of which he is a cadet is very poor, and has no interest to spare. So he had to save and wait for many a weary year, before he could purchase his troop; and might have waited yet longer for his majority, if a death vacancy had not helped him. Indeed, he could say—like that

veteran whose mild little joke answered so well—"It was no wonder if he were somewhat bald, when so many had gone over his head."

He might have been comparatively affluent, and a field-officer long ago, if he would have exchanged: but the one aim of his life's ambition has been, to command the Princess's Own; and it is rumoured he has laid by enough to attain this, whensoever Vereker shall become weary of soldiering. No earthly thing is so near to the Major's heart, as the honour and well-being of that famous corps. He believes as religiously as any other Article of Faith—and he is a sincere, single-hearted Christian—that there never was such a regiment since the days of chivalry—

And never will be, till the world shall end.

In spite of his personal economy, the veriest spendthrift of them all is not more free-handed than he, whenever there is a question of expense that may augment the festive renown of the mess. It is, indeed, mainly owing to him that the Prancers are so marvellously popular. The

youngsters are always fond of Old Alec (as they call him, with a kindly irreverence when his back is turned); and he keeps them up to the social collar admirably, whenever they show signs of shirking. He insists that it is incumbent on soldiers, who have been hospitably received in a county, to reciprocate, by being ever ready to breathe such female relatives of their hosts as may be chorographically inclined. And this maxim he has backed up for many years by example, no less than by precept. Practice has made him perfect to a certain extent; he waltzes with a mechanical precision, just as if he were executing an evolution in the saddle. If not a very brilliant, he is a very safe, cavalier; and is no more like to bring his partner to grief, than to 'club' a squadron in the field.

So Kate is not much to be pitied, after all. This, too, is evidently her husband's opinion, who—leaning against a pillar, near to the top of the hall, discoursing horse-and-hound talk with Frank Braybroke—ceases not to follow her admiringly, with his honest eyes. Every suc-

ceeding year, Tom reflects, with increasing satisfaction, that his pet "can hold her own with the best of them still."

And there is no lack of competition. For, on these special occasions, it is the want of Marlshire matronhood—still short of life's meridian—to indulge their genius in the dancing line; many that, in town and elsewhere, never venture on anything beyond a staid quadrille or chastened Lancers, or beam on you from the wall with a steady lustre, flash out, for the nonce—the brightest of revolving lights.

"It's a very full meet, to-night," says the Squire, at last. "I make out several new lots; and all the old ones—but one. Doesn't it seem strange—not to see a single representative of Mote? Brian's mourning is well over, surely?"

And Tom Seyton's face darkens, as he answers—nearly in the words of that bold lady, who bearded the regicides in their den—

"He has more sense than to be here."

More sense: or, perhaps—not enough of

courage. For Maskelyne was becoming a moral coward, as far as his wife was concerned. Nor was this so wonderful. At the few gatherings at which they had been present—archery-meetings and the like—the feeling of the county was not to be mistaken. The cold civilities of a few, only made the neglect, or aversion, of the majority stand out in stronger relief. Brian knew, well enough, what awaited them, if they should brave it out at a Torrcaster ball. He guessed, that the scanty circle that would rally round Bessie would be made up of courtiers, of whom even she need not be proud—a few beardless cornets, too young to be seriously compromised by any small social folly—two or three 'outsiders' of the squirearchy, who might think it worth while to sacrifice somewhat of their dingy dignity to the dinners and preserves of Mote—a stranger or so from a far country, like Bertie Grenvil; privileged offenders, when they could plead a fair face as an excuse.

For his own position, Brian had entirely ceased to care; but, on his wife's account, he was morbidly susceptible: he felt that he *could* not face

the present ordeal. She herself—with all her wilfulness and self-reliance—did not feel very eager for the encounter; and, when her husband expressed a reluctance to go, thought it better to acquiesce sullenly; reserving her sense of injury for a more fitting occasion.

Perhaps, both were right; though, with every backward step before the tide setting against them, they lost ground never to be regained.

Did you ever, at an assembly where the notabilities of a county are gathered together, see a beautiful woman put, wholly or even partially, under the ban? Such as have assisted at such a spectacle will not lightly forget it: I think that modern civilization can show us few sadder ones. It happens somehow, that seldom or never is a plain or unattractive female tied to this social stake: almost always, it is some lovely Lady Glamis, with whom frail humanity cannot but sympathize, even if she have deserved her doom.

It is all pitiful exceedingly: the hardihood of the victim as she rears her fair white brow, defiantly, against her tormentors; striving not

to betray the smart, were it by the quiver of an eyelid, while the small poisoned shafts come home,—the eager lighting-up of her face, as some ancient friend, or recent acquaintance, draws near,—the blank disappointment, harder than anger to dissemble, as the prudent knight passes by, unheeding,—the feverish triumph, in the midst of pain, when some paladin, more reckless than his brethren-in-arms, dares to wear her colours, at least for this night's tourney: more pitiful than all—to such as reverence the tenderness of womanhood—the scarcely covert exultation of the skilful archeresses, who, safe behind the rampart of the Château Vierge, smite and spare not.

You will be good enough to remember, that I am not speaking of proven guilt, where the presence of the culprit is an insult to her former fellows: but only of those cases of rumour and surmise, where no worse can be alleged against the lady than the vague Irishism,—'She has had a blast.' Neither am I prepared to deny that, 'whatever is, is right?' But—admitting the

justice of the sentence—it follows not, that we should delight in witnessing its execution.

Moreover, an instinct of humanity, and not one of its worst, impels us to condole—if not to side—with any one overborne by superior numbers or superior strength; and this is wholly irrespective of the righteousness of their cause. A most exemplary divine—by no means Ultra-Muscular, and Anti-Colenso to the back-bone—confessed to me, awhile ago, that, throughout the first of recorded Sacred Wars, his sympathies went consistently with the Philistines—save in the matter of Samson.

CHAPTER VI.

LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI.

In the boudoir, at Charteris Royal, once more.

Darkness has set in an hour ago; one shaded lamp in a remote corner scarcely relieves the general depth of shadow; only when the oak-pile smouldering on the hearth bursts into fitful flame or a tiny volcano of sparks, the walls and hangings shoot out gleams of blue and silver; the fountain still tinkles on, with the same subdued monotonous music; and the same faint exotic fragrance hangs in the air, as when you last were here.

Once more Marion is deep in a *tête-à-tête;* but, this time, a woman shares her confidences.

A singularly picturesque group—seen even in this imperfect light.

The fair *châtelaine* is nestling on a broad velvet

cushion; her right cheek pillowed on her arms that are crossed over her companion's knees. The latter half reclines in the depths of a vast low lounging-chair; the hand that supports her chin coming forth a little out of the shadow, so that each flash from the embers falls on the slender wrist and shapely fingers. In spite of the intense indolence of the attitude, you will be struck, at the very first glance, by its inexpressible grace. You cannot judge of the colour of their raiment; yet, somehow, you know that it is rich and rare; even before a fire-gleam, brighter than its fellows, brings out sheen of velvet and shimmer of gems.

Let us say a word or two as to the stranger's outward seeming—speaking, as though she were now in the full day-light, under which, sooner or later, she must needs appear.

Yet to some who read, she may not be utterly a stranger. For—more years ago than are pleasant to count—I, who write, tried to sketch that same face; and failed, I daresay, as I surely should fail, now.

Yet it lived once, in flesh and blood fatally fair: the face of Marmaduke Dorrillon's wife—born, Flora Bellasys.

A few summers have passed over her head since she first sat for her portrait; but no shadow of change has marred her royal beauty. The superb figure has fulfilled the promise of youth—no more; the severest sculptor could not wish it lighter by a line: the bright healthy blood mantles as richly as ever under the soft olive skin; but the clear rose-tint is not a whit too warm in colour: the features, though they bear the stamp of strong passions and stronger will, are still matchless in delicacy and refinement of outline: more liquidly lustrous than ever, dream or glitter the fathomless hazel eyes.

It is a loveliness, that absolutely 'kills' the outward attractions of other women. Marion Charteris is undeniably handsome—handsome, too, in a peculiar and striking style; but when, later to-night, she stands by Lady Dorrillon's side, she will seem like a pretty fading water-colour, hung next to a fresh master-piece in oils.

Yet, in that marvellous beauty, there is something that warns you to beware. It is not such as a man, if he were wise, would wish to see near his own fire-side; not one from which he might hope to draw comfort and cheer, when the day's hard work was done. It reminds you of those gorgeous tropical flowers, whose perfume is so subtle in its strength that none can long inhale it, without dazing of senses and swimming of brain.

There is rather a remarkable picture, that perchance you may know. I forget how it is called; but I think Noel Paton painted it.

A low sandy shore, over which lower leaden clouds, deepening into a night-black horizon. In the foreground, a crowd of struggling figures: almost every age and craft of manhood is represented there. A portly priest, duly shaven and shorn; a poet, with the fresh laurel-wreath gleaming in his long loose hair; a senator, in robes, that ought to sweep around him in graceful dignity, but sorely dishevelled now; a miser, griping mechanically the money-bags that could

not help him here; a lean, haggard despot, his hollow temples shadowed with the tyrannic crown; a fair youth, with soft beardless cheeks, and lips made for tender smiles—not to be writhen thus; and, saddest sight of all, a stalwart veteran, crushing in his mailed gripe the slight staff of Acrasia's banner. On each and every one of these faces, differing widely in feature and natural expression, the same stamp is set; a desperate longing, a very agony of desire, marks them all; and with this seems to mingle a sort of instinctive horror, as though they wist of their doom. Yet none the less eagerly do they press onward; so intent on one object, that they scarcely heed other temptresses in their midst; meaner ministers of the Queen-Syren; who, with her mocking smile and pitiless magnetic eyes, floats in front of the throng, luring them to their graves in yonder sullen hungry sea.

Few, who knew the woman, ever could look on that picture without thinking of Flora Dorrillon.

They were great allies, those two: though, like many more important ones, their alliance

savoured strongly of a protectorate. Self-willed and wayward as she was in most matters, and with most other people, Mrs. Charteris rarely stood up for her own opinion when it was in direct contradiction to the other's; and—appreciating her own powers of fascination very highly—she would never have dreamt of pitting herself against that especial rival. Thus, it was not strange, that no serious disagreement should have troubled their friendship, since it was first formed soon after Marion's marriage. Nevertheless, they were not exactly in the same set; and met, oftener in their own houses than anywhere else. John Charteris was not a rigid disciplinarian, as you are aware; but he would scarcely have allowed his wife to be regularly enrolled in the *coterie*, of which Flora was the acknowledged leader.

The Flemyng flirtation had been carried on almost entirely in the country, and at Rome; and it so happened that Lady Dorrillon, albeit perfectly cognizant of its rise and progress, scarcely knew the male culprit by sight.

And now Marion, having told her tale, and made her moan, looked up in her friend's face, for consolation and counsel. Flora liked the pretty penitent, as well as it was in her nature to like any woman; nevertheless she seemed rather inclined to dally with her distress; for several moments passed before she made answer; and, as she mused, her full scarlet lips wreathed themselves into a smile, wherein there was something of satire, and a not unkindly disdain.

"There has been more folly than I dreamt of, *ma belle*. And are you quite, quite sure you have told all? Half-confessions only bewilder one. It is hardly worth while for us to play at cross-purposes; I really would help you, if I could."

The dark grey eyes, that were gazing up so pleadingly, grew brighter and larger, with a surprise natural and unfeigned.

"I haven't an idea what you mean," Marion said quickly. "What could I have kept back? And what earthly reason could I have for making half-confidences to you? It's very unkind of

you, Flora—and not like you a bit—to be so suspicious and unbelieving."

As Lady Dorrillon answered, her white lithe fingers strayed delicately over the pretty speaker's soft tresses; in that very fondling there was a sort of careless indifference; she might have been toying with the silky ears of her favourite spaniel.

"Don't be plaintive, please. If you are more innocent than I thought possible, there is no harm done. I certainly did suspect something more serious than what you have confessed. It seems I gave you too little credit for common sense, or—too much; for I never heard of such costly child's-play. Then you are quite sure, that he has no hold on you whatever, except your unlucky sins upon paper?"

Marion was not puzzled now; she understood the other's meaning right well. The flush deepening on her cheek, came not from the red flickering embers.

Weak, even to wickedness, are many natures, even when not wholly perverted. Instead of

feeling thankful that she had nothing worse than reckless coquetry to own, she felt, for the moment, almost ashamed of her innocence in the presence of the beautiful cynic who, from the height of superior science, smiled down on the novice with a sort of contemptuous pity.

I write 'science' advisedly. For no one knew, of a surety, how far Flora Dorrillon carried out in practice the tenets of her evil philosophy. It was popularly believed that her principle was, to take all—giving little or nothing in return. This much was certain: no favourite had ever yet been established so thoroughly in her good graces, as to avoid disgrace—and disgrace without warning—when a fresh caprice was to be gratified; she would cast a heart aside, when she had drained it dry, as you would fling away an empty fruit-rind. But the world could only babble on surmise. Of all whom her fatal fascinations had lured to moral, if not to social wreck, never a one had bewailed defeat aloud, much less boasted of victory.

There is a sad story, told by Lever right well,

of a veteran of the Great Army, who was brought to a court-martial for having carried out a secret order of Napoleon. Very long and piteously the criminal looked for help into the pitiless marble face of his chief, who could have saved him with a word; and, finding there no leave to speak, accepted the extremity of dishonour, rather than put in one justifying plea; till at last his brain reeled under the agony, and he went forth from before his judges hopelessly insane; never more to utter any intelligible words, save these—

"*Silence, à la mort.*"

Even so, Flora Dorrillon's victims — having broken plight with all others, and trampled duty under foot—never forgot that one *consigne;* and, to the very end, kept faith with their betrayer.

The absurd compunctions above alluded to, Mrs. Charteris would scarcely have owned to herself: you may be sure, she was not tempted to confess them, even to her confidential friend. Indeed, her disclaimer was as plain and positive as could be desired, and carried conviction with it irresistibly.

"I see my way now," Flora said, decisively. "I think we can get you out of this scrape, *mignonne;* and it will be a good lesson for you. Now, I know as well as possible, what you're going to say. 'If you are once quite safe, you'll never flirt again.' How very childish! You'll flirt to-night, and to morrow, and to the very end of your appointed time. It isn't worth while making vows to me; especially as I don't mean to set you any further penance; indeed, I don't think it likely you will fall into such a trap again. What puzzles me is—how you ever were caught at all. Any one who could act so very basely, as this man seems to have done of late, ought hardly to have been fatal to your peace of mind. There's the danger of derogating, my dear: you never know exactly where you are, or what is coming next. Denzil Ranksborough would hardly play you such a trick as this, on any provocation. You had better choose your *cavalieri* from our own set, for the future. Now—tell the truth—did you ever really care for Mr. Flemyng?"

Once again, Marion blushed slightly; as she mused for a second or two, the soft pensive smile was playing on her lip, that is usually provoked by a pleasant or tender memory. She ought to have been sketched just then; as she looked up into Flora's face, with a charming expression of mock penitence.

"Well—I don't know. I'm afraid I did care a little at one time, after a quiet fashion. It seems strange now, of course. But he really could be very nice, when he liked. And then—we were such very old friends. I'm sure *I* never meant any harm from first to last. That is what makes it more cruel of him, to torment me so."

Lady Dorrillon shrugged her beautiful shoulders, as if her friend's simple sophistry was not worth sifting or refuting.

"If it was so, it can't be helped," she said, with a little sigh. "It's no use scolding you now. A much graver question is—do you care the least bit in the world for him, at this moment?"

A grave question? Graver in truth than either wist of.

Walking through forest-land, ever and anon we come across an ash, or beech, or elm, on the bole of which is painted a rude red cross: in the root there is no sign of decay; the branches flourish wide and fair; yet we know, that the hollow mouldering pollard, hard by, is not more surely doomed: the woodman's hands may be full for the present; but it is a simple question of months or weeks or days; before the leaves are green again, that trunk will cumber the ground no longer, but make room for its luckier fellows.

Let us use, once again, the most ancient of all similes, comparing man to a tree. There was nothing solemn or menacing about that pretty pair; they looked no more like judges than the dainty boudoir looked like a Star Chamber. Nevertheless, then and there, on Vincent Flemyng's life the death-mark was set.

Perhaps some instinctive consciousness made Marion pause; and, when she did answer, her light laugh may have dissembled a vague trouble or fear.

"No—I am sure I don't care for him now," she said, with a firmness that cost her an effort. "The foolish fancy was over, long ago; if there had been any danger of a relapse, I should have been thoroughly cured the other night. I wish, sometimes, we could be friends again. But I suppose there is no chance of that?"

"Not the faintest," Lady Dorrillon retorted. "Once more—you must be quite frank with yourself, as well as with me. I cannot help you, unless you can give Mr. Flemyng up absolutely, without reserve, except, of course, as an ordinary acquaintance. I will not be hampered with regrets and repinings on your part, much less with jealousy. That last would be especially inconvenient, you know. Don't look scandalised: it's quite possible to be jealous, after one has ceased to care: or—where would our small vanity be?"

'Scandalised,' was hardly the word to describe the expression of Mrs. Charteris' face, as she gazed up at her companion, with bewildered eyes.

"You—you don't mean to say, that you will

take charge of him, yourself?" she said, as soon as she could recover breath.

"What else could I mean?" Flora answered, carelessly. "I see no other effectual way of helping you. You might look a little more grateful, my Marion. Can devotion go farther, than throwing myself in the enemy's path, to draw off his fire, and give one's friend time to escape? To speak the truth, I rather want amusement just now, and this affair has so many new lights and shadows in it, that it promises to be quite picturesque."

The cool way, in which the other took it for granted, that she had only to will it, to detach her own sworn servant, was almost too much for Mrs. Charteris' equanimity.

"You make sure of success, at all events," she said, rather petulantly.

"Perfectly sure, *ma toute belle;* it being understood that you stand aloof and waive all possible claims. I am not greatly afraid of any other rival, who is likely to appear here."

Under the mock-deference of the reply there

sparkled a covert satire, sufficiently provoking. But Marion's brief irritation was over already; she was too wise to quarrel over phrases, with one who was ready to help her in her time of need; besides this, you know that she had an unlimited respect for Flora's powers of fascination, even when compared with her own. She sank back again, very meekly, into the attitude in which you found her; and answered, in her prettiest coaxing way,—

"I don't think it would make much difference, dear, even if I did try to keep him. I believe it's all true that men say of your sorceries, you terrible witch! But are you not afraid for yourself—knowing what Vincent Flemyng is capable of?"

A fitful flash from the embers lighted up the superb hazel eyes, glittering in disdain; and the scarlet lip curling.

"Afraid? Afraid of a spiteful boy like that—and fore-warned too. Thanks, for the compliment. I would make you such a pretty curtsey, if I were not so comfortable here. No: I think

we may venture to try conclusions, even with such an unscrupulous diplomat as *le sieur* Flemyng."

There was a silence for a minute or two: then Marion spoke softly—almost timidly.

"Don't be angry, dear. I am not regretting Vincent now; and this is my very, very last moment of weakness. I can't help remembering that he *is* scarcely more than a boy; and I can't help fearing that you will work him some deadly harm; without intending it, perhaps. But —Ah, Flora, you have no pity."

The beautiful face did not become set or stern; yet a certain change came over it; reminding you of a picture unskilfully glazed, so that colours—softly blended before—seem contrasted hardly; and the grave grey eyes looked, not into her companion's, but straight into the fire—strangely steady and firm. If some of Flora's victims could have watched her countenance while that change abode there, it might have saved them many a heart-ache—if warnings can ever save.

"No pity? You are right. And, shall I tell

you why? It is because men, who are really men—true, brave, and strong—have nothing to fear from *us*. As for the others—what pity do they deserve? Don't they take, every day, women as good—if not as well born and well taught—as you and I, and fling them aside when their fancy palls, like their faded yellow roses. Do you suppose any one of these would halt, if he saw our dishonour at the end of the path that it pleased him to take? I shall never pity any living man again. Yes—I do pity one, sometimes—my own husband."

There was no change in the indolent grace of her posture; her voice never rose a note above its wonted measure of harmony; but the bitter earnestness of the speaker sent a shiver through Marion Charteris' nerves, which were remarkably steady as a rule.

"I can't bear to hear you speak so," she whispered; drawing closer to her friend, as frightened children do. "You will make me wish I had told you nothing."

Lady Dorrillon's face softened instantly: she

laughed a little low laugh, marvellously musical, though slightly tinged with mockery.

"I was on the very verge of heroics. It is all your fault, *ma mignonne*. You provoked me by becoming tearful over a creature like that; who would make capital out of your foolish notes, just as a dishonest clerk might, out of papers that don't belong to him. I can't see much difference between demanding money, and insisting on compromising concessions: it's simply extortion in either case. But don't concern yourself for Mr. Flemyng: he has nothing worse to fear than a sharp lesson, which I think he greatly needs. Now, I am going to send you back to the others: they have been wearying for you—at least some one has—this half-hour, I know. And I must write one or two letters before I dress. You must play your own part naturally; it's not a difficult one. But don't overdo confidence, in trying to show that you are not afraid. I only want you to trust me, now: you shall thank me, when you can sing, with a safe conscience—*Il biglietto; eccolo quà.*"

So—having first dropped a light kiss on her companion's upturned brow—(I suppose no feminine covenant is binding without this seal) —Flora Dorrillon broke up the cabinet-council, and went her way.

For some minutes after she was left alone, the expression of Marion's face was pensive, if not melancholy. As she mused, her lips parted once, and two words escaped them:

"Poor Vincent!"

There was nothing like sharp sorrow, or heavy sadness in her tone, but rather a vague passing regret, such as one might feel,—standing by the grave of a friend, over whose head the tomb-slab was laid, years and years agone. Then she rose, and shook out the folds of her ample raiment, and straightened a tress that had fallen awry; smiling that suppressed half-smile of contentment, that is rarely absent from a fair woman's face, when she stands before her tiring-glass. Even so, you may see some beautiful bird 'preening' her ruffled plumage, after a storm-shower. When Mrs. Charteris joined the circle in the green

drawing-room, not a trace of trouble lingered on her smooth brow, or in her laughing eyes: she was thoroughly and naturally herself again—brilliant in outspoken banter; caressive in whispered confidences.

When Vincent Flemyng arrived, shortly before the dressing-gong sounded, she welcomed him with her wonted impulsive cordiality; albeit the announcement of his name broke up a most promising *tête-à-tête*, in which Denzil, tenth Baron of Ranksborough, had deigned to evince some slight signs of vitality.

CHAPTER VII.

SNAKE CHARMING.

One of the most popular of English living writers—good on all points, but specially good in his pleasant practical philosophy — remarked awhile ago, on that natural law which obliges every grown male to face his liabilities, moral if not financial, whilst performing certain portions of his morning toilette. It seems to me, that the aphorism applies, in a modified shape, also to the ante-prandial hour wherein a man dons leisurely, piece by piece, his evening harness. Ordinary mortals—with no definite object in view, or conversational reputation to sustain—finding themselves under a strange roof, on the point of confronting a large mixed society, are apt at such a season to take stock of their resources and prospects.

So Vincent Flemyng—sitting, half-drowsily, over the blazing fire in his comfortable chamber, whilst his servant made the last necessary preparations—fell, inevitably, to musing over his position at Charteris Royal. His speculations were very parti-coloured.

Turning the roseate side outwards first—there was the pleasant fact of being established in the best possible quarters, with every chance of retaining them, so long as it should please him to tarry; the recollection that he was there, rather by his own will than from the free invitation of others, did not damp his triumph, just then; for it brought with it a grateful consciousness of power. Besides, the tones of Marion's welcome were yet ringing in his ears; was it not likely that she had already repented of her vagaries, and—far from bearing malice—was ready to make peace and amends, after the fashion of bygone days?

But, in folding and re-folding any mantle whatsoever, the dark lining must sooner or later be revealed. Ere long the hue of Vincent's

meditations began to change disagreeably. He was both prompt and pertinacious in his resentments, as you know: he had conceived an antipathy—not unmixed with dread—of Denzil Ranksborough, from the first moment of their meeting in the town-hall of Torrcaster: he could not disguise from himself, that the man who had supplanted him seemed dangerously at home here. Moreover, Flemyng's eyes were sharp enough to have remarked, on entering the green drawing-room, that Ranksborough was sitting alone, and aloof from the rest of the party: it needed no very vivid or suspicious imagination to fill up the blank space at his side. With that, rose the memory of certain glances that Vincent had intercepted, in the course of that same evening at Torrcaster: he could not mis-construe these, any more than that look of mingled aversion and scorn, when Marion rose under his hand, and defied him. In truth, the *châtelaine* of Charteris Royal, enthroned in the midst of her own set, appeared a much less impressionable and assailable personage, than the Fiametta

of eighteen months back. Eighteen months? Why, it seemed as many years, since he heard her so re-christened.

Besides all this, there was the reluctance, common to most men of his temperament, when they have to encounter a company of comparative strangers. For, with all his vanity and outward superciliousness, Flemyng's self-possession and self-reliance were, really, below par: though he owned it not to himself, and would never have forgiven you, had you hinted at such a possibility, he felt ill at ease in certain presences and situations—not so much from natural shyness as from want of nerve. He felt instinctively, that he had little sympathy to expect from the society then assembled at Charteris Royal: neither was the master of the house likely to afford him countenance or support. Only under one banner could he hope to battle successfully: *il fallait arborer le cotillon.*

Now this state of things is exceedingly depressing and discouraging even to persons of strong or stolid mind.

Some years ago, half-a-score of men were sitting round the dinner-table of a pleasant country-house, not many leagues from Doncaster. It was the evening of a Leger very disastrous to backers; and nearly every one present had been plunging more or less heavily. But they were a tolerably seasoned lot, and, thus far, had taken their punishment gallantly if not gaily. At a very late hour, some demon—cloaking his malice under the specious pretext of 'what is due to society' —prompted one of the party to observe—

"Don't you think, it's about time we joined the ladies?"

There was a pause; and then made answer a cynic, bolder than the rest—

"How can we do that—*when they haven't got a single feeling in common with us?*"

The dreadful truth of the objection (for only the males had gone in to Doncaster that day), added to the contrast of present defeat with the hopeful speculations of the evening before, struck every one, only too forcibly. The proposer of the move looked in his fellows' faces; and—

finding there only the reflection of his own discontent—gave up the suggestion, with a dreary laugh; and they all fell again to moody drinking.

Just at this point in Flemyng's reflections, he chanced to remember that hint of Marion's, concerning some great attraction that he was to meet at Charteris Royal. He had forgotten those words almost as soon as they were spoken; but he turned his head, lazily, now, to ask his servant if he knew who were staying in the house, and who had come that day.

The man had not had time to gather a complete list; but he ran over seven or eight names; amongst them were those of Sir Marmaduke and Lady Dorrillon.

The slight start that Vincent could not repress must have been as purely instinctive and unaccountable as the shiver which, according to old wives' tales, warns us that a foot is treading on our grave. He had never been near enough to Lady Dorrillon to touch the hem of her garment; and he had only seen her about a score of times, in the Park or

at the Opera; for Vincent had never yet entered into London society—properly so called. On each and every one of these occasions, he had been impressed—as who was not?—with her marvellous beauty; and had, perhaps, once or twice, watched with a vague envy the coming and going of such "gilded youths" as had the *entrée* to her box on the grand tier. But it had never entered even into his vanity to conceive, that he could himself be brought actually within the range of her artillery. Nor, indeed, did it so occur to him, now. After that utterly inexplicable start of surprise, he felt only that disinterested gratification, mingling with a faint curiosity, that might affect any of us, finding ourselves unexpectedly under the same roof with some royal or famous personage. If he speculated at all, it was to wonder, who might chance to be the lady's favourite for the nonce; with a shadowy idea of gaining some useful hints from their proceedings.

The sum of Vincent's meditations came to this. He would secure a few confidential words

with Marion as soon as possible. If he attained no other advantage, he would at least be able to ascertain his own position more clearly, and become aware of the general "lie" of the social ground at Charteris Royal. He knew that it was the lady's habit, to be first in the state-saloon wherein the guests assembled before dinner; and he resolved to bring off one of the brief *tête-à-têtes*, that had been not unfrequently managed in the old times. He was wise enough to be aware that he had pushed intimidation quite far enough already; and was now prepared to accept any decent overtures of peace; without scanning the conditions too closely.

With these magnanimous intentions, the gallant addressed himself to the business of his toilette, without further delay; and got through it as rapidly as was consistent with a little extra in certain details; such as the arrangement of the profuse glossy hair which was still one of the best points in his personal appearance.

About a quarter before eight, Vincent laid

his hand on the lock of the state drawing-room; with a confidential smile ready on his lip, that meant—all sorts of things; condonation of the past; intelligence for the present; solicitation for the future. With this expression—really artistic in its way—he intended to bear down upon Marion, as she sate in her favourite corner, near the further angle of the huge fire-place, and facing the main entrance.

As the heavy oak swung noiselessly on its cunningly-wrought hinge a low murmur came from within: as Flemyng stood still and listened mechanically, he could discern two voices; one of which he knew for Marion Charteris'. A bitter blasphemy crept out between his teeth—he had grown terribly apt at cursing of late—as he thought, whose that other might be? For ten seconds or so, he hesitated whether to advance or retire: then he entered; clearing his brow as best he might, for he felt it lowering sullenly.

But the cloud lifted from his face, before he had gone three steps beyond the threshold; for

then he was aware that one of her own sex was Marion's solitary companion.

The stranger was sitting with her back to the door; she never stirred from her half-reclining posture as it opened; and never stayed the slow sway to-and-fro, of the gorgeous feather-screen, which she seemed to hold rather as a plaything than a guard; for a jutting angle of the ponderous carved mantel shielded her from direct fire-heat. So, as Vincent Flemyng advanced, he only saw the topmost tresses of a smooth dark coronal; and here and there, the soft subdued shimmer that comes only from perfect pearls. But he knew as well, as if he had perused the picture at his leisure, that he was looking then on a beauty world-renowned; and that ten steps more would bring him face to face with Flora Dorrillon.

As I have said before, Vincent would have resented the imputation of bashfulness, as a mortal insult: nevertheless, it is certain that he would have waxed nervously diffident, then, had time been given him to think. But, before he quite

reached her side, Marion Charteris looked up, with her merriest glance of mischief; and beckoned him nearer with a sort of impatience.

"How dreadfully slow and languid everyone is, now-a-days. Vincent—you glide into the room as if you were going to tread a minuet; and Flora —you won't rouse yourself for three seconds; though I've been setting my heart on this meeting for ever so long. And it is so lucky, that it should happen before any of the stupid people come down. I mean you two to be the greatest allies. Such very old friends of mine might dispense with formalities. But, wait—I'll go through the ceremony properly."

She rose, and performed the presentation in due course, with a courtly stateliness, wonderfully graceful in despite of its mock-solemnity.

In Lady Dorrillon's smile there was less of mirth, than of apology and appeal: it said, as plainly as if the words had been uttered,

"You know this madcap, as well as I do? You won't hold me accountable for her wild humour?"

And the long lash-fringes were lifted slowly till the full light of her earnest eyes rested on Vincent's face; dwelling there, whilst she went on speaking.

"I am very glad we have met at last, Mr. Flemyng. I have heard so much of you of late, that you hardly seem a stranger, now. And from others, besides Marion. Did you know that Everard St. John was a cousin of mine? He has talked of nothing but your Nile voyage since he came back; except when he has bemoaned his being prevented going on with you through Palestine. He has shown me some sketches, too —only two or three—just enough to make me long to see more of your handiwork. It would be odd if we did not get on well, for a little while, at least: we have so much common ground to talk on."

As she ended, she held out her hand, quite naturally and frankly. Yet, in that action, there was nothing brusque or bold; but rather a graceful waiving of superfluous ceremony.

If you have at all realised the overweening

vanity, and extreme sensitiveness as to his own social position, that were salient points in Vincent Flemyng's character, you will be able to form a fair idea of his state of mind at this especial moment.

In all his life he had never felt so triumphantly elated. It has been hinted before that, even in earlier days, he was not insensible to certain solid advantages, not of the most creditable nature, attaching to the post of cavalier-in-waiting to Mrs. Charteris; the recollection of these may have helped to fan his wrath, when he saw—or thought he saw—himself supplanted. It is shameful to write, but true. At the bottom of Vincent Flemyng's passion lay, not only intense selfishness, but a calculating fore-cast most unusual with men of his years. He had come over to-day, in full confidence of wringing some valuable concessions from Marion, even if it were hopeless to regain her favour; but such a triumph as this had never entered into his dreams of dictation.

A new vista in life seemed to open before him,

as name after name rose in his memory, of men far removed above their fellows, in rank and wealth and power, if not in virtue or wisdom, who had, from time to time, glittered in the courtly circle that called Flora Dorrillon, queen. In that circle might not he—Vincent Flemyng—be already numbered? Had not the Sovereign herself—of whose imperial caprice so many tales were told—promised him advancement even before she claimed his homage? He was on terms of *tutoiement*—at second-hand—with these two fair women already; for his own Christian name seemed to mingle naturally with theirs. That first familiar address, was a great, if unintentional, stroke of Marion's policy.

Altogether, Vincent was so perturbed, that he could hardly mutter some incoherent commonplaces, as he bent over the slender gloved hand—rather lower than courtesy demanded; so low indeed, that the gesture wanted but little to have made it a salute.

Would it have taught him caution or distrust, if he had looked behind him just then, and

marked the scornful mischief gleaming in his old love's eyes?

All this, which is so long on paper, was brief enough in action: yet the time for confidences was passed, almost before Flemying stood erect again. For the centre-door opened, to admit one guest after another in rapid succession. But Flora Dorrillon was none of those who do their work negligently. The faintest possible gesture of her fan told Vincent that he need not stir from her side just yet: indeed, though she favoured others with a few careless words, as it were in passing, she did not virtually break off her talk with him till dinner was announced.

That talk had turned only on the most ordinary topics conceivable: nevertheless, as Vincent followed in the wake of the others, he was sensible of a strange bewildering lightness of heart and brain, mingling with a keen pleasure, that made the pulse throb almost painfully: he remembered vaguely having felt much the same, whilst yielding to the influence of his first dose of *hachis*. It was lucky that neither of his neigh-

bours at table were disposed to draw heavily upon Flemyng's conversational bank: for it is most certain that such drafts would, that night, have been recklessly dishonoured.

There were the elements of a tolerably pleasant party there; if one were in form to appreciate them. It is not worth while to give a *catalogue raisonnée*; but one or two more figures may be picked out, that you may the better realise the scene-accessories amidst which the chief characters move.

Do you see that dainty dame, dressed in the very perfection of quiet taste; sitting, as it were, in the shadow of the huge centre-pyramid of foliage and flowers, so that the light of the chandeliers falls on her with a chastened brilliance? That is Lady Greystoke—not lightly to be spoken of by whoso admires Art in all its branches: she is probably the choicest extant master-piece of cosmetic science.

"A perfect picture"—says Flora Dorrillon; scanning her critically through the mask of leaves.

The words are not more malicious than true. It would be well for many of our modern *tintoretti* if they bestowed as much care in choosing and laying on their colours, as Lady Greystoke's artists expend on their handiwork. She began 'painting' quite early in life—none knew why—when her complexion could have faced any scrutiny, unaided: she has gone on painting ever since; not straining after absurd juvenility; but gently toning down the evidences of advancing years; she has allowed a soft sprinkle of silver already to appear amongst her glossy braids; and she will glide gracefully down the decline till she shall show us how old age can be charming without ceasing to be venerable: but—she will paint, to the very end; and murmur perchance with her latest breath—

> . . . Give this cheek a little red;
> One would not, sure, be frightful when one's dead.

The man on Lady Greystoke's right, emphasising his rapid utterance with a mobile energy of gesture, and incessant eye-twinkles, is Robert

De Visme; also a remarkably clever person in his way.

Despite his foreign patronymic, and rather foreign vivacity of manner, he is an Englishman bred and born; not particularly well bred or born, either. For many years he was a hard-working barrister fairly successful, if not eminent in his profession: it was not very long ago, that they made him Commissioner of Unstamped Deeds. From his earliest start in life he had had one object steadfastly before him—a seat in the high places of society: for this he had worked patiently and sedulously, as many work for a seat on the Woolsack. He was not only himself a capital talker; but possessed the rarer talent of making others talk in their turn; after spending an evening in his company, you might fail to recollect any single brilliant witticism falling from De Visme's own lips; but you would certainly remember that the conversation had never once languished; and would, perchance, be impressed with an agreeable conviction of having contributed your own full share to the general amuse-

ment. Men began to ask him to mess, or to their bachelor dinners, long before they thought of introducing him to their home-circle, or to their feminine relatives: but invitations of a somewhat informal character, to river pic-nics and the like out-door festivities began at last to drop in: thenceforward he found his way, slowly but surely, upward, till he settled into his present position, which he holds, as he holds his Commissionership, 'for life, and during good behaviour.'

From the moment that his foot was set fairly down within the Inner Circle, Robert De Visme took his own line, and has kept it ever since. He knew right well that Beauty is never more avid of homage, than when she can arrogate it no longer: he knew how keenly ears—once disdainfully deaf—watch for the lightest sound, when

> Parcius junctas quatiunt fenestras
> Ictibus crebris juvenes protervi;

and he turned this knowledge to good account. Leaving to those who are 'to the manner born,' the budding charms of spring, and the maturer

glories of summer, he has constituted himself the squire of such dames as must own to late autumn, if not to early winter. In rendering this devotion, he ran, you will perceive, no risk whatever: his own peace of mind was, evidently, as safe as that of the ancient matrons whom he delighted to honour: beyond the grand climacteric there is a casemate—safe if somewhat dreary—proof against all the artillery of scandal. But these harmless *petits soins* he knew how to invest with an earnestness and air of reality, which saved them from insipidity; the anecdotes, too, with which his talk was thickly studded, were always sufficiently spiced to suit the palate of his hearers; so that the Pompadour *en retraite* in the draught of mawkish water found all the flavour of the old forbidden wine.

In counting on quinquagenarian gratitude, De Visme reckoned not without his hostesses: his table, during the season, is strewn with as many cards as that of the most eligible guardsman; and the doors are open to him of more country-houses than he has time to enter. He might

have married more than once, advantageously in point of rank and money; but he has enough, and more than enough, for his needs; and is well aware that he would not better his position by altering his state. So, though Lady Greystoke—his 'first mistress' for the nonce—is a widow of some years' standing, neither she nor the rest of the world are likely to misconstrue his attentions.

That elderly man, near the upper end of the table, with a fine benevolent face, and hair like white spun-glass—leaning forward with an air of gentle deference, to answer a laughing remark of Mrs. Charteris—is also a note-worthy character.

Cecil Castlemaine is the younger brother of a penniless earl: he started in social business some two-score years ago, with a patrimony of three thousand pounds, his wits, and the honourable handle to his name. One division of his capital was spent in about eighteen months; the other two have maintained him ever since, living on the fatlings and first-fruits of the land.

Trainer in ordinary to the Nobility. There you have his profession: though only tacitly acknowledged, it has long been as clearly defined as if he dated his letters from Middleham or Ilsley. Yet, there is not the faintest taint of the Mulberry Hawk about Cis Castlemaine. He neither plunders his pupil in person, nor stands in with other robbers; but, as far as lies in his power, will prevent the youth from being bled more freely than is good for a plethoric financialist. When the heir to the Marquisate of Carabbas comes to his own, and requires that his house be set in order, or 'mounted,' as becomes his station, he betakes himself to Mr. Castlemaine, and prays that respectable personage to tarry with him, till all these things be completed. There is no compact, of course—verbal or written; but all is not the less thoroughly understood. Nor does Cecil acknowledge that he underlies any obligation, in thus living in perpetual free-quarters. Independently of his own practical usefulness to his entertainers—he considers it the bounden duty of wealthy and well-born

youths, to minister to the necessities of the veterans in their own class; such necessities being the *primeurs* of every clime. With the newly-enriched plebeian, until after the third generation, he will have nought to do.

Truly, Cecil is anything but a vulgar parasite. His manner—perfect at all times—savours of the deference of the Old School, with womankind: but with his own sex he is more apt to lead than to follow; in his extreme of courtesy there is not a shadow of obsequiousness. His manner of speaking is slow, and somewhat solemn, without being exactly sententious; and at times, there is a sort of suave sternness in his demeanour that rarely fails of producing its effect. The most pampered menials were never known to treat Mr. Castlemaine lightly or irreverently: indeed, in certain establishments, such as have been already alluded to, you would see the servants, occasionally, look to him for orders, even in presence of their natural lord. And so he floats contentedly down the Great Stream, attracting the envy, if not the admiration, of many; in very

truth, though it is difficult to respect, it is impossible quite to despise him.

His present charge is that small pale youth, whose smooth face is stamped with such a palpable impress of precocious cunning, that it reminds you irresistibly of the legends concerning fairy changelings.

Lionel Hardress comes of a very ancient and wealthy stock; the scions of which, for many generations, have been more famous for their vices than their virtues. The present representative of the family is not likely to compromise himself by any extravagant follies, or costly sins. But if the spirits that led his forefathers astray have departed from him, there has come in their stead, a cold selfish avaricious devil, worse—some would think—than all the other seven. He took to the Turf before he was fairly of age, and, in the first year of his apprenticeship, contrived to make himself both disliked and distrusted by the more reputable members of the craft: even the ring-men are beginning to be shy already about meddling with his money,

either as backers or layers; and deem it best to leave the Hardress 'good things' entirely alone. He is by no means a pupil after Cis Castlemaine's heart; and people say that ere long the tutor will give sharp and sudden warning.

One more sketch—and a sadder one—again of a man far advanced in years; who sits on Marion Charteris' left hand.

In those features there are still traces of a personal beauty, in spite of the weary pain-stricken look which is, plainly, habitual there. There is a haggard watchful expression in the eyes, half-timorous withal; the frequent nervous smiles are so mechanically courteous, that they light not up his face a whit. If you are easily moved at sight of human misery, I think you would begin to pity that old man, before hearing his name: if you did not do so, after learning his story, you would be harder of heart than—*La Belle Dame Sans Merci.*

In the latter days of the Regency, Sir Marmaduke Dorrillon was at the zenith of his evil fame; about this period he fought that famous

night-duel which some ancient gossips in Florence have scarcely yet forgotten. He had succeeded one of his own countrymen in the good graces of a fair Marchesa; the latter boasted one afternoon, at the Casino d' Nobili, somewhat too loudly, of a certain love-token which he still wore. Sir Marmaduke only heard of this after sun-down; and the two men crossed swords before the moon was high. The Englishman knew himself to be less cunning of fence; and deliberately exposed his own left side; when he felt the cold steel in his shoulder, he threw himself forward on the blade, and drove his own home, till hilt and breast-bone clashed. That same night, at the Opera, Dorrillon sate, in his accustomed place, close behind the Marchesa's white shoulder. He tarried not long; only long enough, to give the lady back the trinket which had cost a life; and to whisper a few words that made her cheek paler than his own; then, in the sight of all Florence, he kissed her hand in courtly farewell, and went his way—to see her face no more.

Perhaps Sir Marmaduke was not worse than the other dandy dare-devils of that wild time; nevertheless, it may be presumed that, in his hot youth and fiery manhood, he did rather more than his fair share of mischief to man and woman —to foe and friend. If it was so, retribution has rarely been more complete on this side of the grave, than that which has fallen on him.

He loves his wife, not with a sober paternal affection, suited to the difference in their years; but with the helpless, consuming passion which is, often, the heaviest curse of undisciplined old age. He is so nervously afraid of irritating her, that he dares not even look disapprobation of any of her proceedings; indeed, his whole life is spent in striving to anticipate her caprices; thinking himself overpaid for the costliest sacrifice, by a faint careless smile, or a cold formal caress.

But you will see more of Flora's husband, anon.

There are more faces round that table, that would scarcely pass unnoticed in a crowd: but

you need not pause to examine them; for some you know already, and others may as well remain strange to you, for aught that they have to do with this tale of ours.

Yet you may find something amusing, if not instructive, if, for a few seconds, you watch Bertie Grenvil.

The Cherub's countenance is a perfect study of mild melancholy: it is only too plain, that he is endeavouring—not unsuccessfully—to induce his neighbour to sympathise with his sorrows. By all that's atrocious—the neighbour is no other than Minnie Carrington.

Mrs. Charteris, despite the press of her own affairs, had found leisure to remark that promising flirtation at the Torrcaster ball. Being exceedingly good-natured and indulgent in these matters—on the *non ignara mali* principle—she has asked the Carringtons to dine and sleep, quite out of their turn; for the ordinary Chalkshire squirearchy are invited to Charteris Royal, according to a regular 'roster.'

The mother—a good woman, but vain and

weak withal—could not bring herself to put aside the unwonted honour; but she has begun to repent herself ere this; and tries to counteract her imprudence, by shooting volleys of warning glances at her daughter, accompanied by short sharp coughs at intervals: the poor lady might as well reserve herself for the reprimand which will, sooner or later to-night, be Minnie's portion; for the damsel's eyes and ears have, just now, a special retainer.

Bertie Grenvil knows how to ride a mile-race as well as most men; and he is forcing the running remorselessly. Minnie has found courage — not without much blushing and pretty hesitations—to attempt a little meek chaff on his celestial nickname; requesting to be enlightened as to its origin, &c.

To which the Cherub makes answer with a diabolical gravity—

"It was because I was so very innocent, when I joined; and so childishly easy to be imposed upon. And I'm not a bit harder or wiser now, Miss Carrington. If you only knew how dread-

fully people take advantage of me—your sex, worst of all. But one wouldn't so much mind being trampled upon, if they would be a little sorry for one sometimes. You're all so pitiless; that's the worst of it."

And Minnie—having some vague intention of putting in a disclaimer of mercilessness on her own account—looks up timidly in the speaker's face; but her long lashes droop in a sudden shyness nearly akin to fear; and she subsides into roseate silence. Of a truth, there are not many women of her innocence and age, who—when he means mischief in earnest—can meet, untroubled, Bertie Grenvil's eyes.

And, all this while, Vincent Flemyng sits, like one in a dream, eating and drinking, mechanically, what is set before him, with an utter disregard of the proper succession of meats, or mixture of liquors. If he rouses himself for a moment from his reverie, his glances wander not towards the top of the long table, where Lord Ranksborough holds the right-hand place, but rather towards the lower end, where,

in the proximity of Lady Dorrillon, John Charteris' arid conversational powers have been forced into unnatural bloom; whilst his dull respectable face hangs out temporary illumination in her honour.

CHAPTER VIII.

COFFEE AND A CHASSE.

It was more the spirit of perversity and contradiction, than the ancient attraction, which caused Flemyng to manœuvre his way to Mrs. Charteris' side, almost immediately on entering the green drawing-room.

Only Lady Greystoke was sitting very near Marion; and the ears of that excellent lady—naturally discreet—had waxed somewhat duller of late, from causes over which she had no control. It would have been a fair chance enough for explanation, or settling of differences, had Vincent been that way inclined; but—far from this—he only felt anxious to keep as far as possible on safe neutral ground. Nevertheless, it was absolutely necessary to make some allusion to what had passed awhile before: there were cer-

tain rough edges, left on the breaking-off of their last confidential converse, which needs must be planed and polished away.

"Do you know what I come for?" Vincent said, in a subdued voice, which yet discreetly avoided a whisper. "It is for absolution. I've been restless from repentance ever since Wednesday night. I don't think I could close my eyes under your roof unless I heard again that you would forget and forgive. I can't think, how I could have been so rude and overbearing. But you must have known, that I could never mean seriously to threaten. Just say 'Go in peace'—it won't take you long—and then, I will trouble you no more."

Once again, for the very last time, Marion's heart—a warm and kindly one, in despite of the many faults that warped it—softened towards Vincent Flemyng. Her dark grey eyes were rather sad as they rested wistfully on his face.

"Yes—I can forgive freely—now; and forget—in a little while—all that is worth forgetting. I would far rather, not believe that you could

ever be deliberately cruel. It would be so easy to prove it, too: if you would only——Vincent—you know what I mean."

Though the words were scarcely audible by the ears for which they were intended, the strange earnestness of the speaker did not escape Lady Greystoke, sitting hard by: but that discreet dame only shifted her own position slightly, so as to screen Marion's face from general inspection; and then looked straight to her front; betraying no further consciousness by the shadow of a sign.

If Flemyng's heart had been large enough to hold common honesty—to say nothing of honour;—if he could only have met frankness with frankness, and confidence with confidence; it might not have gone so hardly with him in the after-time. But this was just what he could not do. He thought within himself—

"This is what she has been aiming at, all along; with her soft seductive ways, and sham cordiality. She only waits to be quite free, to throw off the mask, and set me at defiance. But she may

serve me well, yet; from fear, if not from love. So—shall I give her back those letters? Not if I know my own mind, and my own interests."

Curiously enough, the new sensations that had sprung up within him, since he fancied that Flora Dorrillon's smile encouraged him to hope, made him less inclined to be generous to the woman who had paved the way for him, there: the commercial value — socially speaking — of Marion Charteris rose with each fresh evidence of her power. Besides, to a vanity like Flemyng's it was intensely gratifying, to hold the lure to which so beautiful a tercel must needs stoop, whether she would or no; it was not likely that of his own free will, he could cast away hood and jesses.

It is hard to write—perhaps, not pleasant to read—of such baseness. But, this is not a story of Dreamland, where all things are done, decently and in order. If you write of this coarse work-day world, you can no more ignore certain repulsive phases of character, than you can write a history of London, without mention of its

courts and purlieus. It is not wise or needful to linger over a disagreeable subject, any more than it is, to *flâner* in an unsavoury alley. But in our walks abroad—whether it be the body or the mind that wanders—be sure that we shall see the sordid, oftener than the savage side of crime.

You will remember, being warned long ago, of the black drop in Flemyng's nature, that was sure sooner or later to come to the surface; so that you were not tricked into any false interest in his fortunes. True it is, that actual yellow dross never entered into Vincent's speculations: with this single exception, he seems not a whit more deserving of sympathy than that ingenious gentleman—lord of vague Pyrenean *hectares*—who a while ago made his plaint before the Marlburian judgment-seat, and found a worthy Gallio sitting there. Yet, in despite of his cynicism, natural and acquired, Flemyng made but a poor business of evasion and denial: to affect to misunderstand Marion, would have been too absurd.

"I guess what you mean"—he murmured hurriedly. "You—you shall have back, all you want: really, you shall. But—I—I've brought nothing with me, here."

He was lying; and she knew it; she would have known it, if the nervous tremor of his tone had not helped to convict him. At that instant the latest spark of pity or tenderness for her old playmate, died in Marion Charteris' breast, as suddenly as if a torrent of ice-water had swept athwart it. The very fact of realising the position, would have given her courage and self-possession, had either been lacking. Something told her that the persistence in intimidation came not from the petulance of jealousy, but rather from cool sordid calculation: from that moment, she ceased to be afraid of, or for, Vincent Flemyng. She felt towards him, exactly as she would have felt, in the presence of some importunate creditor, whose claim could not conveniently be settled on the spot: if she had blenched before such, she would not have been her father's daughter.

But a politic instinct made Mrs. Charteris droop her eyes from their steadfast gaze, and pass her filmy kerchief lightly over her lips, before she spoke: otherwise, the expression of one or the other must surely have belied the careless gaiety of her words.

"I fancied you would have been more thoughtful, when you could guess at my wishes so well. But you will set me right with myself, sooner or later; I am not afraid. It is so much pleasanter, to trust; and easier, too, now. For you will very soon cease to trouble yourself, about me or mine. Poor me! Didn't I tell you, how it would be? It is cruel, to chain you here, when you are wanting to be elsewhere; and—wanted—I dare say. You needn't look penitent: it is the way of the world; and there are plenty more sinners, to keep you in countenance. Go, and prosper."

Flemyng was, constitutionally, unapt to betray emotion by any change of colour; but the veriest novice could not have blushed more palpably than he did, as his glance followed Marion's, towards the remote corner, where a select circle

was already beginning to form round Flora Dorrillon. And then, his brow lowered sullenly: for, on the chair nearest to the lady's right-hand, lounged the man whom Vincent honoured with his special hate. It was some comfort to mark that the conversation, over yonder, seemed general and not particularly interesting to any one concerned: the listlessness was heavy on Ranksborough's face; and Flora was fluttering her fan slowly and monotonously, like one whose attention is only mechanically engaged.

The looker-on need not have disquieted himself, had he been aware of all the truth. They were very old friends—those two; and knew each other too thoroughly, ever to have been more. Ranksborough liked to take his coffee in the immediate vicinity of a handsome woman, just as he liked to have a master-piece of Etty's confronting him in his own dining-room; and Flora valued her artillery of fascination far too highly, to waste it in blank-cartridge practice.

But that one glimpse of the state of things over against him utterly overset all Flemyng's

powers of dissimulation and self-control; though neither were of a mean order. A nervous irritation possessed him; making it intolerable to stay where he was: the utmost that he could do, was to gather his moral forces together, so as to beat an orderly retreat. In this he succeeded not ill.

"I accept the dismissal," he whispered; bowing his head with a mock humility. "If I were to argue with you, now, it would take up too much of the time that belongs to others: I had nearly forgotten that you are hostess here. But I'll try and convince you, whenever you have leisure to listen."

And so, Vincent sauntered slowly away. If you have ever watched a carrier-pigeon circling round and round, at starting, before she makes her point, you will have a fair idea of the meanderings that saved appearances, and yet brought him in brief space to Lady Dorrillon's side.

Marion Charteris drew a long sigh, rather of impatient weariness, than of regret, as she turned to Lady Greystoke.

"How *gauche* you must think me," she said. "But it will not happen again. I was, really, obliged to speak seriously to Mr. Flemyng. He borrowed some photographs of mine, in Rome; and I have never been able to get them back. It makes a dreadful blank in my book; and, I believe, he only keeps them, to tease me. It is so very tiresome of him."

The elder dame glanced at the speaker, with her keen black eyes—still bright and satirical as ever; and her smile was full of meaning.

"Don't apologise, dear. I think you were quite right to speak seriously, under the circumstances. Only, I should have filled up the blank in my—book, long ago. It *is* very tiresome of Mr. Flemyng, though. But pages are apt to be tiresome, when they out-grow pagehood: and then—there is but one way with them, in any well-ordered household."

"But one way, indeed"—Marion answered, with a light laugh. Just then, other guests gathered round her; and she was the pleasantest of hostesses, once more.

Notwithstanding the fascination that overbore him, and the encouragement of a quick meaning smile as he drew near, Flemyng betrayed no great haste or eagerness in joining the circle round Lady Dorrillon. For several minutes he was content to hover on the outskirts thereof; and did not come fairly to the front, till the chair on Flora's right-hand was empty. Even in his animosities Vincent was not apt to forget the better part of valour; something told him that it would be advisable, for the present, to avoid a possibility of breaking a conversational lance with Ranksborough. Neither did the latter seem anxious to give such a chance: after finishing the last drop of his *chasse* very leisurely, he rose and lounged slowly away. Yet there was something in his manner that irritated Flemyng vaguely; to say nothing of a sort of amused intelligence that seemed to under-lie the laziness of the great black eyes.

As Ranksborough departed, Flora's ample skirt expanded, in some mysterious fashion, till it half-shrouded the chair on which he had been

sitting, and warned off intruders: equally mysteriously did it contract a few seconds later, when Vincent found himself accidentally in that especial corner; leaving a temptingly vacant seat.

Have you ever watched a real mistress of coquettish tactics manœuvre her drapery? The famous mantle, that put all the dames of Camelot to shame, save only Sir Caradoc's true wife, cannot compare with some modern *vertugâdins*, in capricious elasticity.

Anyhow, Vincent seemed to fall, quite naturally, into the post of honour; neither did any of the others seem inclined to begrudge it him. They all belonged to the class with whom an instinctive tact supplies the void of delicacy, should such be wanting: seeing that their fair chieftainess had a fancy for a *tête-à-tête*, they bowed, courteously, to the caprice, without any sign of impertinent intelligence; and so, dropped off, one by one, leaving Flemyng, at last, alone in his great glory.

Once again, they talked only on common-place topics—mutual friends, incidents of travel, and

the like; yet none the less, in a brief hour's space, wild work was wrought in Flemyng's heart and brain.

There was rather a curious paper written some time ago, bearing on the connexion between Sound and Colour; illustrated, if I remember rightly, chiefly from the experiences of the blind. If your musings had strayed in this direction, after listening for awhile to Flora Dorrillon, there would, surely, have risen before your mind's eye, visions of deep gorgeous crimson, or imperial purple. And, through all the soft richness of those tones, there thrilled a subtle vibration strangely contagious; so that your own voice began to tremble, long before you were aware that you had hearkened to her—not harmlessly.

When the party broke up for the night, Vincent went to his room, to doff his evening armour, and to don loose raiment fit for the *tabagie*. But this purpose seemed forgotton as soon as the door of his own chamber closed behind him; for he sate down in the nearest arm-chair; and, in three minutes, was staring

into the embers, evidently in a reverie not lightly to be broken. Nor was it broken, till it was too late to think of joining the smokers below: even if he had felt in cue for their society. The least astute bystander would have realised the truth which, perchance, Vincent did not disguise from himself—he was fairly bewitched.

Bewitched.

It is a pretty word enough to write; and, when uttered by a pair of rose-bud lips, is scarcely less effective than Prunes or Prism. Do you know what it means, sometimes?

It means, that a mind has become suddenly warped and marred, as a body might be by a palsy-stroke; so that the plainest precepts of laws, divine or human, seem weary lessons, learnt by rote long ago, and not worth the remembering: it means that a man would stab his best friend in the back, to win one of the witch's smiles; and rob an altar, to buy gewgaws for a white neck or rounded arms; and trail his family-honour in the mud, like a thread-bare cloak, to keep a wanton's slipper unsoiled. And

in the symptoms of the malady there is a terrible sameness. When it has fairly taken hold, wisdom and folly, courage and cowardice, virtue and vice, are all as one. The keen eyes that could pierce even the twilight of Hades, could see little difference in the swine wallowing in Circe's sty.

CHAPTER IX.

UNDER A CLOUD.

THE smoking-room at Charteris Royal was a fair specimen of its class—large, airy, and lofty; sufficiently, not desolately, distant from the centre of the house. It had been the justice-chamber in former times; and had only of late years been converted to its present uses; for the last Squire had lived and died a rabid Anti-Nicotian. His son, inheriting many of his prejudices, was yet wiser in his generation. Ill fares it, surely, with the host who shall refuse to make concession to the spirit of his age. It would be easier, and almost less cruel, to debar a thirsting hart from the water-brooks, than to stint certain men in their tobacco, after a certain hour of the night. I only know one great house, the despot of which is, in this respect, unrelent-

ing. There—after first casting lots to settle who shall be the self-devoted; for the penalty in case of discovery is perpetual banishment—the smokers muster regularly in some bachelor's sleeping-chamber, and hide their oppressed heads in clouds of their own compelling.

But, with all his stiff old-fashioned ways, John Charteris was not ill-natured, or inconsiderate towards his guests. He had taken some trouble about the furnishing and adornment of the *tabagie:* there were comfortable arm-chairs enough to make an imposing circle round the wide hearth and the walls were nearly hidden with such pictures (chiefly of a sporting character) as were deemed unworthy of a place in the saloons or galleries. Though he never touched tobacco, alone, he rarely failed to appear in the smoking-room for a quarter of an hour or so; during which time he would puff slowly and solemnly at an extraordinarily small and pale cigar; evidently looking on himself in the light of a W. M. opening a Lodge with all due formalities. But a certain reticence and reserve hung

about the conclave whilst he abode there; the liveliest imagination could scarcely manage a fetter-dance in his presence, and a sense of relief and freedom visibly pervaded the party, when—with a few muttered words of excuse, which nobody was expected to answer—he departed to his blameless couch and heavy slumbers.

There was not a large meet on that especial night; only some half-dozen drew their chairs in closer to the fire, as the baized inner door swung to behind John Charteris. Amongst these were Bertie Grenvil, Cecil Castlemaine, and Denzil Ranksborough.

The three—sitting, as it chanced, side by side—make rather a picturesque group, from the very contrast of colouring.

The Cherub is a 'thing of beauty' indeed, in rich maroon velvet, broidered down every seam with glittering arabesques; his small, shapely feet cased in slippers to match, bearing his monogram in heavy raised gold. Ranksborough is in velvet too, blue-black as his own hair and eyes, unrelieved by a single thread or stitch of lighter

colour: the effect is good, albeit intensely sombre; he might have stepped out of the frame of a picture painted in Venice ten score years ago. Beyond him is Castlemaine; scarcely less magnificent than the Cherub, but in a very different style. With the present curt fashion of lounging attire, Cecil will have nought to do: his portly figure, on these occasions, is ever draped in an ample dressing-robe, such as only Eastern looms can weave, wherein hues, gorgeous in themselves, are so deeply blended that they produce but a softened harmony. On the opposite side of the hearth is De Visme, in sad-coloured raiment, perhaps more costly than that of the other three; for that russet fabric is worth more than its weight in gold, even in the shadow of Kashmerian hills. The remaining personages are merely 'sitting gentlemen,' with whom the chronicler has no concern.

The talk so far, is neither animated nor well sustained; a sort of patch-work of disjointed sentences, dropped in the careless listless fashion of men who, having started no subject of general

or special interest, are rather wrapped up in the nice conduct of their first cigar. At last said Castlemaine—

"Does anybody know anything of the man who came just before dinner? Flemyng's his name, I fancy. There's no harm in talking of the devil; for it's clear we are not to be honoured with his company to-night."

Now the wary old stager happened to have heard more about the sayings and doings in Rome, than any one else then present: but he kept his stores of knowledge exceedingly dark; no buzz or hum betrayed the purpose of the busy social bee, as he went about his noiseless labours.

> Gathering honey all the day
> From every opening flower—

he had acquired the knack of making the said flowers expand and render up their riches, whether they would or no. Moreover his habitual prudence was more than ever on its guard, under the roof-tree of Charteris Royal, and in the presence of Ranksborough; about

whose feelings towards his fair hostess, Cecil had already formed his own opinion: so that his cue evidently, was to know nothing; and even to be shadowy as to the new comer's name.

It chanced that, either none present were well 'posted' in the state of affairs, or instinctive delicacy kept them silent: for some seconds it looked as if the query would remain unanswered. At last, Bertie Grenvil said carelessly, never stirring the cigarette betwixt his lips—

"Didn't I hear something about him, the spring before last? I'm sure I did. And it had something to do with——"

He threw his head backwards and upwards, significantly: every man in the room guessed at once to whom he alluded. Ranksborough's marble face changed not a whit; but his black brows were drawn together ever so slightly. The subject was not new to him—be sure, Marion had made her case good, in that quarter, long ago—but he did not relish hearing it discussed just then. That faint sign of annoyance did not escape De Visme's prudent eyes, and he came

readily to the rescue: when it was worth his while, he could turn the course of a disagreeable or awkward remark, and as boldly and adroitly, as a *banderillo* drawing off the charge of a Murcian bull.

"'No scandal about Queen Elizabeth, I hope'—least of all foreign-made scandal. And your version of it is wrong, Grenvil; or much exaggerated. *I* heard something about it too from Archdale, who was in Rome at the time. A handsome woman out there, all alone, is bound to have some special lord or gentleman-in-waiting. I think Mrs. Charteris showed very good taste in choosing a raw 'clerk of Oxenford' and an old family-friend."

Castlemaine gave a little nod of approbation and encouragement.

"That's the way to take it," he said. "No woman, who knows how to live, ought to be compromised by such a 'follower.' I never saw conceit and fretfulness more plainly written on any face: he must be in a chronic state of bristling; and conceive, what a nuisance that must

be! I dare say, he was a very useful *cicerone.* I do remember something about him now. Usedn't he to play at painting?"

"Perhaps you're both right; and I'm wrong, as I generally am," Bertie answered, with utter indifference. "Anyhow, it don't matter: whatever was, is over; that's clear. He had no eyes or ears to-night for any one but the Dorrillon. What form that is! He was only introduced to her about two hours ago—I took the trouble to ascertain that—and he's knocked hopelessly out of time, already."

Lionel Hardress broke in here: his voice was so unnaturally harsh and deep, for his age and physique, that it almost startled you; and his hard laugh was not pleasant to hear.

"How do you know, they're not both in the same stable?" he said. "I'll lay odds on it, myself. I watched Mrs. Charteris's face—for want of something better to do—all the while the other was making play. She was looking as pleasant as you please; just as a man would look, who has squared everything in the race, so

that they're all running for his money. There's some plant up: you see, if there isn't."

Denzil Ranksborough's eyes rested on the speaker with little favour, yet with a languid curiosity: they rested so long, that Hardress, who was not easily disconcerted, waxed uneasy under their gaze.

"What the d—l are you thinking of?" he asked, in some heat.

The other took his cigar from between his lips, and watched the thin blue smoke-coils expanding, for some seconds before he made answer—very slowly.

"I was thinking—what a wonderful 'tout' was spoiled, when you were born to twelve thousand a year."

No one stood on delicacy with Hardress; whose hide was known to be proof against any ordinary home-thrust; so that the laugh was general. And the boy laughed himself, after a moment's hesitation, and one spiteful glance at Ranksborough. Indeed, it is possible that he more than half relished the equivocal compli-

ment. His chief ambition was to be considered a 'real sharp hand;' and occasionally to be mistaken for his own trainer—not Castlemaine, *bien entendu*, but an astute professional, noted for unscrupulousness beyond his fellows. In both of these objects—the last especially—he had succeeded tolerably well: in dress, manner, tone, and talk, master and man were a pair of Syracusan Brothers; and, though there was a score of years between them, comparative strangers were sometimes puzzled, even after having a fair look at the old, old face on the young shoulders. So Lionel was in nowise disconcerted: he was used to being mocked at for his peculiarities, and not unfrequently had the laugh on his side, before all was done: perhaps though, his tone was a trifle more sulky than usual, as he answered.

"I'm very well off as I am; and I don't want to change. But you're pretty right, my lord. There's not many games I'm not 'fly' to, if I once begin to watch 'em."

With such a party as were there assembled,

very scant encouragement is needed to turn the talk into a dilution of Ruff's Guide. So it happened now; and in this groove the conversation flowed on or stagnated, till the others had all dropped off, one by one; leaving Castlemaine and Grenvil alone.

One of the peculiarities in Cecil's organisation was his faculty of dispensing with any approach to beauty-sleep. If

> The best of all ways to lengthen our days
> Is to borrow a few hours from the night—

his debt must have rolled up by this time, into something fabulous. Indeed the habit had become so engrained into his nature, that, had his head been laid on pillow much before 2 A.M., it would probably have tossed about restlessly till day-break; as it was, he slept usually the sleep of the just, and rose late; seldom indulging the world with his countenance much before noon. He was a steady, without being an inveterate smoker; though his cigar was seldom extinct, his solemn deliberate puffs made tobacco go a very long way. At many thousand late vigils—not to

say orgies—had that fine benignant face of his assisted; and yet there was hardly a wrinkle on his smooth forehead, nor on his cheeks, whereon lingered still a faint tinge of peach-bloom; and he still carried his hoary head as gallantly erect, as if it had been a 'crown of glory.'

The Cherub, too, would keep terribly late hours, by fits and starts—it was part of his system of burning life's candle at both ends, and melting it in the middle to boot—on this particular evening he seemed in no sort of humour for bed, and would probably have lighted a fresh cigar, even if he had not liked his company.

But Castlemaine and he were great allies. The former, as you are aware, stood a good deal on his dignity and would abide no undue familiarity, especially from his juniors; but he was always 'Cis' to Bertie Grenvil. He liked the reckless handsome boy—with his gentle winning ways, and wild dare-devilry in play and love—either from sympathy or from memory of what he himself had been, well enough, to have helped him out of one or two serious scrapes, with sound

advice and yet more substantial aid. And the attraction was decidedly mutual,—they generally had a little confidential chat, when they found themselves alone together.

So after a brief silence Castlemaine began to speak, in his wonted deliberate fashion; yet there was a slight tinge of impatience in the gesture, as he shook off the long white ash from his cigar, fully a minute too soon.

"You heard what Hardress said. What do you think of it?"

"Yes, I heard," Bertie answered. "It's difficult *not* to hear that voice of his: I'm sure it was pitched by nature for the Ring. I haven't thought much about it; but I've no doubt the 'tout' is right. He always reminds me of a child I saw in Ireland ages ago: a small bullet-headed boy with hardly any hair on his head to speak of; so little indeed, that I couldn't help remarking it to his mother. 'Indade then yer honner,' she said, 'he's as cunning as he is bald.' And that's about the mark with Hardress: he'll spoil his eyes, if he don't mind, with always looking so

sharp into mill-stones. I shouldn't wonder if he's on the right scent this time: perhaps, as he elegantly phrases it, 'they are both in the same stable.' But why on earth they should give themselves any trouble about Mr. Flemyng; or why the Dorrillon should waste her best tackle on such a samlet, when a thread and bare hook would have done as well—is far beyond me. I'm deuced bad at working out problems; and never guessed a riddle since I was a baby."

The elder man leant a little forward in his chair; lowering his voice discreetly from mere force of habit; for he knew himself safe from listeners.

"It's simple enough, I fancy. I chanced to hear a good deal more about the goings on in Rome, than you did perhaps, or than I chose to allow before the rest of them. I'm half sorry I mentioned the man's name; but I wanted to find out what they knew. De Visme has heard a good deal too, I'd swear; though he turned it off devilish well. There's no doubt about it; Mrs. Charteris made a fool of herself out there—if

nothing worse. It's no use shrugging your shoulders, and lifting your eyebrows: it was bad taste, of course, for he carries 'cock-tail' in his face; but not a bit worse than I've met in my time; and so have you, in yours. But she saw her mistake long ago; and she *don't* see the pull of having him dangling about her here in England, and hampering her in her innocent amusements. I believe they are tolerably innocent; but she could no more exist without flirting, than she could live on barley-bread and water. So she has got the Dorrillon to take him off her hands for ever and a day. Mr. Flemyng had better make the most of John Charteris' '47 wine: he won't drink much more of it after this visit ends, you may take my word."

The Cherub whistled long and low.

"If that's the case, I wouldn't give much for his chances. It's about the neatest way of dropping a troublesome admirer down the *oubliettes* that I've heard of, of late years: quite worthy of a high and well-born *Herzoginn*. There's no fear of Flemyng coming to life again, when he once

disappears down the trap. You didn't know Percy Arundel, perhaps? He was in my battalion. The evening he was introduced to Lady Dorrillon, she carried on just in the same way as she did to-night. Poor Percy! He was as good a fellow as you ever met, in those days; and was engaged to as nice a girl as you ever saw. I don't know what's become of *her*; but I met *him* last summer in Brussels; looking so utterly disreputable that I almost shirked him. He went straight down-hill from that very night, without a check, at a killing pace, too; and he had twice the bone and breeding of this amateur artist."

After a pause Castlemaine spoke again.

"It's a curious age we live in, certainly. Here have we—not only you and I, but all the rest of them—been discussing the love-passages of two women, just as if it were a case of matrimony and honourable intentions, with both their husbands sleeping within three hundred feet of us. A queer state of things to prevail in the most moral country in Europe."

"If they're sleeping, it don't so much matter"

—Bertie said, philosophically. "But I'm afraid poor old Sir Marmaduke has restless nights, as a rule. He's looking terribly worn and broken of late. I'm rather glad that I've had no share in thinning his grey hairs."

"They do you great credit—both your compassion and your continence"—the other retorted, with some irritation. "It's a pity you don't bestow the one, and practise the other a little oftener. You're right, though. I've known Marmaduke Dorrillon these thirty years: there never was a finer specimen of the Ancient Régime till he married that ——" All Cecil's courtesy towards the sex scarcely kept back the bitter word that was on his lips: he just swallowed it however, and went on. "There's one pleasant house spoilt for all convivial purposes; and there would be another, here, if Ranksborough could have his way. Not that he will, I think; but the intention's the same. Because an explosion only happens once in twenty times, that don't make it safer, to play with gunpowder. You're just as bad, one as the other: I never pity you when you

come to grief. Why on earth can't you let the wives do their duty, without trying to spoil them for general society? The *chasse aux mariées* was never meant to be naturalized on this side of the Channel."

"It's 'diamond cut diamond' at the worst"—the Cherub said. "The friskiest matron of them all can take pretty good care of herself, if she really wants to go straight. And their hearts are tough enough—tougher than girls' hearts at all events."

He spoke coolly and indifferently; but with the last words his face darkened. He had begun thinking of the beautiful brown eyes that had looked up into his own, so trustfully that night; and of the low sweet voice that had faltered so often in its timid replies; and of the tiny hand that trembled so in his clasp, whilst he bade Minnie Carrington 'good-night.' What a dear honest little thing she was! And what business had he to fool her for his amusement, when he had no more chance of marrying her, than if she had been of the blood-royal? The Cherub, in

his irreverence, utterly ignored the damsel's betrothed, though he was perfectly aware of the engagement; but he could not ignore his own substantial fetters; and they were not only financial embarrassments that hampered him. In the anathema, muttered under his breath, Philistines were included no less than Hebrews; and it lighted not alone on bearded usurers. More unrelenting than the worst of these sometimes, is Delilah —exacting her unwritten bond to the uttermost farthing.

For some minutes the two smoked on in silence: Bertie roused himself, first, from his reverie.

"By the way, Cis; I don't remember ever having come across your name in any of these affairs. It might have been before my time, to be sure: yet, I fancy, I should have heard of it. If you kept clear, it wasn't from lack of opportunity, I dare swear."

The elder man looked keenly, and somewhat grimly, at the speaker, as if suspecting covert taunt or banter: but Grenvil had evidently

made the remark in perfect good faith and simplicity.

"No: you never heard of it," Cecil said, at last: "and never were likely to. I got my lesson before you were born, and it has lasted me my life. I haven't forgotten it yet, though temptation has been over for me, this many a year. I've half a mind to tell you how it happened; not that it will do you a particle of good—Listen, any way.

"When I was a little older than you I had a friend; such as you often find in books; but right seldom in life. I don't mean, a man in the same set with yourself; with the same haunts and tastes; with whom you lounge or drink, or smoke, six nights out of every seven; a man who, perhaps, would lend you his name, or even money, if he could spare it and thought you would pay him back some day. I mean a real staunch friend; who would back you through thick and thin, through storm and sunshine, better than most brothers—better, for instance, than mine. I had such an one then—indeed I had—though it seems hard to believe it now; such luck only happens

to any man once. We never dreamt of such trash as exchanging promises, or making amicable demonstrations; but we *knew* one another—or thought we did—that was enough. Well—after a while Fred married. I only saw his wife twice before the wedding, where I was best-man. I didn't think much of her at first: she had a pretty face, but a weak one, in spite of a pair of great dark eyes; and a childish caressing manner. I was travelling for the next twelve months; and hardly saw them; but I went to stay at Fred's place directly I came back to England; and found myself just as much at home there as ever. There—I'm not going through the whole story; it would only bore you, and it sickens me to think of it. I soon got so familiar, as to call her by her pet name quite naturally, even before strangers. Before long, she began to play off her coquetries on me;—for practice, I believe, at first, or for fun; so it went on, till somehow, I found myself netted. Of course, I ought to have gone far away, and told Fred the reason, taking all blame on myself; or done—anything but what

I did. I know that well enough now; and have known it, these thirty years. But, I stayed on and got deeper into the mire daily. On my honour, the idea of deliberate treachery or of real harm—what you would call harm—never entered my mind; nor, I do think, into hers. But she liked philandering dearly; besides her brain was turned with French novels, till nothing would satisfy her but playing the *Marquise;* and I—I was a hot-brained, hot-blooded idiot. When I did go away, she made me promise, dead against my will, to write to her once: swearing by everything that was sacred that she would burn the letter as soon as she had read it. She hadn't the chance of breaking her word; for that letter came, by an accident, by the wrong post and when she was out. Fred opened it—knowing my handwriting—to see if there was anything to answer by return: it was the first of his wife's seals he had ever broken. There was nothing actually criminal in those cursed four pages — there couldn't be; but there was enough of wicked fooling, to make Fred and me strangers till

death. Till death. That wasn't so very long either. In the second spring after these things happened, he injured his spine in a terrible fall. Poor Fred! he was the best heavy-weight I ever knew: you should have seen him steer a young one over his own stiff country. He lingered for a fortnight or more. I wrote and begged to see him once—if only for five minutes—just to shake hands, and say farewell. Would you believe it? *She* stopped my letter. She owned, afterwards, to the woman who told it me, 'that she was afraid I might make more mischief between her husband and herself': in plain words—she was afraid I should tell tales; and try to clear myself at her expense. Till then, I had taken my full share of the blame. I didn't stop to enquire, whether I had been tempter or tempted: I only thought it hard that, for such a gew-gaw, I should have cast away a true diamond. But that last act of hers made us more than even: I never have forgiven it; and never will. Almost the last words Fred spoke were—

"'Poor old Cis! I'm sorry he didn't come to

say goodbye: I didn't like to ask him; but he must have known, he wouldn't have been turned away.'

"And the day before he died, he sent me a few lines, that reached me just too late: even I could hardly read them—he used to write such a bold firm hand, too!—but I've had them by heart, these many years. If I have ever since been tempted to say words to a wife, that I should not like her husband to overhear, I had only to remember the first line of Fred's last note; and the temptation was over. Such words, at least, I never have spoken—as I hope for God's mercy."

His voice had grown hoarse and husky, long before he ended; and a great change had come over figure, not less than face; making both seem strangely shrunken and aged. It was hard to recognise the portly debonair elder, and cheery boon-companion of a few minutes before, in the haggard and bowed old man, sitting there, gazing blankly into the fire.

Grenvil had no answer ready on the instant;

before he could frame one Castlemaine had lighted his candle and departed abruptly; muttering something about it "being long past canonical hours:" so Bertie was left to his meditations.

Now if the concentrated eloquence of all the preachers in England—from the Right Reverend Bishop of Petroleum, down to the Ir-reverend Spurgeon—could have been poured out on the Cherub's head, in all probability that graceless reprobate would have dozed peacefully under the thunder; and afterwards gone on his way, utterly unheeding and unedified. But the story he had just heard—an ordinary one enough, by no means graphically told—impressed him more than he chose to own. The battered old worldling, who had never in his life dreamt of pointing a moral, had preached a sermon unawares. It is not the first time that a lay archer has sent a chance arrow home, when all clerical quivers might have been emptied in vain.

During the few minutes that he sate musing alone, Bertie, it is to be feared, did not indulge in any definite visions as to a changed Future:

but he felt equal to abstaining from harm for the present, even if he could work out no positive good, and if the amendment should prove only temporary. He swore to himself, that—come what would—he would trifle no more with sweet Minnie Carrington's heart. So—carrying with him the rare burden of a good resolve which he was destined to keep—the Cherub betook himself soberly to his slumbers.

CHAPTER X.

MINE—WHATEVER HAPPENS.

In this tale of ours there are threads not only of soft gay silk, but of dark rough wool: these last must needs be gathered up sometimes, to keep the woof even. So, let us turn our faces towards Mote, once more.

The state of things there was anything but satisfactory. The social *cordon* drawn round the precincts of Bessie Maskelyne's home was still rigidly maintained: the rare civilities of the county were dealt out in niggard formal fashion, with as many sanitary precautions as are used with coin passing through quarantine. You may make almost any animal savage with confinement; and 'confinement' was hardly too strong a word to apply to Mrs. Maskelyne's manner of life at this period.

The few members of the clergy and squirearchy who came to her set dinner-parties did not cheer her a whit: they ate and drank plentifully, but evidently under constraint, and resolutely declined to be amused or amusing. It was worse still when she was alone in the drawing-room with their wives and daughters: these worthy dames and damsels used to break themselves up into small detached knots and carry on whispered converse amongst themselves, which converse invariably ceased—not without signs of trepidation—as soon as the mistress of the house drew near. Occasionally, two or three soldiers from Torrcaster came over to shoot, dine, and sleep; but the visits of these military angels were few and far between; and they too, seemed rather on their guard with their handsome hostess; treating her with a studied ceremony and distant courtesy. They meant well; but—had they been insolently familiar—they could not have marked more plainly their sense of the fact, that they were consorting with a woman not of their own order.

It was no wonder that Bessie's temper—never of the mildest—should chafe under the monotony and comparative solitude that she was forced to endure. And Brian, with the best intentions could help her but little. He had never sufficiently recovered from the shock of his mother's death to be quite his old self again: a morbid disinclination for society grew on him daily; and, daily, he seemed less able or willing to make head against the difficulties that beset him, indirectly, through his fair wife: he took to sitting a good deal alone, in those rooms of which he still kept the key; and, at such times, it was understood that none of the household were to approach him, unsummoned. He was always ready to attend Bessie in her long 'constitutionals' on horseback, or to drive her if she felt so inclined: but the shadow of her discontent fell heavily over Brian; they would ride, sometimes, rapidly for miles, scarcely exchanging a dozen words, and these only of trivial import. Yet did he not love her a whit the less; or slacken in his tender care, that her every whim

and fancy should be provided for: indeed it was almost painful, to see his nervous anxiety to smooth away anything that could possibly be a stone of offence, to the temper that was only too prone to stumble.

At last, in sheer despair of seeing things improve as they stood, Brian proposed a year's travel on the Continent. Bessie seemed to catch at the idea quite eagerly at first: but, two mornings after it had been mooted—they had been discussing routes and plans, till late on the previous evening—she suddenly professed herself unwilling to move just at present: alleging as an excuse, her father's health, which, indeed, was breaking rather fast; but concerning which, till that moment, Bessie had betrayed a very temperate solicitude.

Mr. Standen was present at this sudden parade of filial affection; and his face was quite a study. Bewilderment, a faint gleam of intelligence, a decided sense of the ridiculous, and a certain awe of the imperious speaker, were all mingled there.

"You're a good girl, Bessie," he said, with a cunning twinkle in his watery eyes; "a very good girl—to think so much of your poor father. He won't hamper you much longer, I fancy, either. But don't you mind me. I'll do well enough, if you'll let me take care of the place for you while you're gone, in my own rooms up there. I don't think I'm strong enough to be turned adrift, just now. Your housekeeper said only last week, that she wouldn't know I was here, for all the trouble I gave: she did, indeed, Mr. Maskelyne."

The cunning look had faded from his face, as he whined out the last words; blinking the while piteously at his son-in-law, whom he always accosted, now, with a timid ceremonious observance. Brian had begun to compassionate the unhappy old creature a good deal of late; and—though he could not manage a sustained conversation—had a kind or courteous word for the other, whenever they chanced to be together. But he was fairly taken aback by this sudden outbreak of Bessie's piety; and stood looking

from father to daughter in a sort of puzzled way, till he felt himself bound, in humanity, to reassure the former.

"Don't think of that, Mr. Standen. You're more than welcome to your quarters here, as long as you like to keep them. They're almost a hermitage, as you use them, I'm sorry to say. But I don't quite understand. You're not worse than usual this morning, I trust? And Bessie seemed so keen about the travelling last night. She knows best, of course. I shouldn't think of taking her away, against her will."

Brian checked himself before the last sentence, which was spoken with an abrupt change of manner; for he had caught a quick warning sign from his wife, intimating that he had better say no more at present, but wait for an explanation.

When they were alone Bessie did explain, that she had spoken that morning with the servant whose special duty it was to attend on her father, and had learnt enough from him of Mr. Standen's state of mind and body to make her loth to leave home, yet awhile. With this Brian was fain to

be content; but, had the excuse been less plausible he would hardly have cavilled or questioned: such was not his way. No man ever carried out, with more chivalrous abandonment, the grand old principle of—

> Trust me all in all,
> Or trust me not at all.

About a week later, as they were riding together, Bessie opened a fresh battery, still harping on her father.

"Brian; I wish you'd let me ask my cousin here, for a few days. Papa's affairs are in the most dreadful muddle, as I happen to know; and Kit is the only man alive who can set them straight. Poor Kit! I'm afraid you never liked him. But you won't mind his coming here for a short visit?"

Maskelyne's countenance fell. There were turns of expression, every now and then issuing from his wife's rosy lips, which grated disagreeably on his delicate ears; but, of all others, he hated that familiar shortening of her cousin's Christian name.

"You're thoroughly right, Bessie;" he said, after rather an awkward pause. "I never did like Mr. Daventry, and I never shall; and I like the set he lives in still less."

Bessie had been in an unusually gracious humour all that morning; but the storm-cloud came over her face now, swift and dark.

"He won't bring his set here with him,"—she said, under her breath.

"He'll bring their manners and customs, though"—Brian retorted, more sharply than he had often spoken. "And they don't improve on acquaintance: at least, I find it so."

Mrs. Maskelyne reined in her fretting horse to a steady foot's-pace with a firm skilful hand; but she was less successful in curbing her own temper: it would show itself, despite the forced levity of her tone.

"Look here, Brian," she said. "It's just as well to be straightforward, and not to play at cross-purposes. We were not swells, when you first knew us—it's no use biting your lip; I mean to talk in my own way, for once—and we didn't

pretend to be better than we were; there was no sham about it. You took me with all my faults —pedigree included. It's very good of you to shelter my poor old father; but—mind—I never asked him here. And I've never coaxed you to be civil to a single other friend or relation of mine. But, if you think I'm going to cut Kit Daventry, whom I've known from a child, and who has helped me and mine when we were hard set for daily bread; why—you're very nearly as much mistaken, as a man can be."

She certainly looked marvellously handsome at that moment; with her soft cheek flushed, not unbecomingly; and her great sapphire eyes gleaming; and her ripe scarlet lip all a-tremble.

There are few occasions in this life of ours, when we should 'do well to be angry, even unto death.' This was one of them. It had been better for Brian Maskelyne to have spoken ever so harshly or tyrannically, than to have relented as he did then. If he had set his foot down firmly there, he would not have avoided

much present and future misery; but he might possibly have staved off dishonour.

Even from the imperfect sketch of his character that has been set before you, you will have realised the lack of moral firmness that caused many of his strongest impulses to come to naught. The spell of his wife's rare beauty held him now—as it had held him before—helplessly fascinated: he was moved, too, with a certain admiration, at seeing her stand forward so boldly to do battle for the absent; he could hardly find it in his heart to blame her, though the absent was so unworthy of her championship. Moreover, he could not but remember, how little countenance and encouragement Bessie had met with from the society into which he had tried to force her; in spite of all that he could do, her life must be very dull at times: that made it seem harder, that she should be cut off from her own people. Besides all this, he despised Daventry so heartily, that he could not—for shame—make him the subject of a grave conjugal quarrel. There is but one end, as a rule, when a man

admits the possibility of surrender: so, as might be expected, after a few seconds of reflection, Brian hung out the flag of truce.

"You take it much too seriously, Bessie. I don't get on well with your cousin, certainly. But he's not a bit more distasteful to me, than half-a-dozen men who dine here, may be to you. If you want me to take a lasting aversion to him, you'll go on frowning for two minutes longer. Ask him by all means; and pray let him stay as long as it suits his convenience. Now, let the sunshine come back again, darling: I'm beginning to shiver in the shade."

A hard and coarse nature was Bessie Maskelyne's; made harder and coarser by her evil training; but it was not bad to the very core.

She would scarcely have been proof against the influence of her husband's manner, even if it had not been her policy to be gracious, when she had thoroughly got her own way. Her laugh rang out musically through the keen clear air, as she smote Brian lightly on the shoulder with the jewelled toy in her whip-hand.

"It's all your fault, you cross old thing! I believe you like to see me in a pet, sometimes. Well—we'll say no more about it: it's so tiresome to quarrel about trifles. Let us have a good stretching gallop now. There's a long mile of turf before us; and Challenger is pulling my arms off to-day."

The Lawyer arrived in due course. He was evidently on his best behaviour; his manner was much chastened and subdued; and he answered Brian's not very cordial greeting, with an attempt at formal courtesy, strangely different from his wonted free-and-easy style of address. It is possible he may have received a private hint from Bessie; but it is more likely that his uncle's sensations affected Daventry in a lesser degree. Even to him, the master of Mote, in his own house, was another personage from the modest lodger at No. 3, Trasteverine Terrace. For the first week of his stay he was virtually inoffensive; spending the greater part of his mornings in Mr. Standen's rooms (to which conferences Bessie was not unfrequently summoned), and strolling

out with his gun after rabbits or ducks in the afternoon; so that he and Brian scarcely met before dinner; at which meal Daventry seemed disposed to enjoy himself thoroughly. But he was moderate in his public drinking; though the butler could have told some curious tales of strong liquors consumed in the smoking-room, and upstairs to boot.

During that week, two of the soldiers from Torrcaster came over to dine and sleep; Daddy Goring; and a late-joined cornet—a great acquisition to the corps; for he was very handsome, exceedingly wealthy, and *too* wicked for his years.

Now the Princess's Own were rather a horsey regiment: without being slaves of the Ring, or gambling desperately, they wagered pretty freely on most important events; and, if the distance was anywise practicable, their drag was never missed at a race meeting. Neither Goring nor Armytage (that was the boy's name) was sufficiently versed in turf-chronicles to be familiar with Daventry's antecedents, though they might

have heard his name repeatedly. So they listened to his after-dinner talk with much satisfaction; purposing to make their profit therefrom, or at least, to come out strong before their less learned comrades. It is hardly necessary to observe that the Lawyer did not part with one iota of really good information: but he made his remarks sound confidential, which did quite as well.

So it came to pass that, before they parted next morning, Goring had invited him to dine on the following day.

The mess of the Princess's Own was exceptionally good: you might feed there for a fortnight together, and never know when it was guest-night, unless you augured it from the presence of the band, or a little extra pomp of plate: not one detail of table-arrangement would have been neglected, had Lucullus, in the absence of all his comrades, been forced to sup with himself, as officer of the day.

And the credit of all this was mainly due to Daddy Goring. From the moment that he came

on the mess-committee he began to work at convivial economy, with the energy and perseverance that is only bestowed on a labour of love; drilling the waiters more diligently than he even drilled his troop; and making the ears of butler and cook to tingle. A pleasant sight was that portly *arbiter bibendi;* beaming on the fruits of his pains, from the presidential chair, which none other, in his presence, thought of usurping; and listening with twinkling eyes, to the approving comments of a stranger, on a peculiarly successful *salmi*, or a beaker of 'dry,' iced to a turn.

It was not a guest-night when Daventry dined there; and only two civilians besides himself were present, neither of whom he had met before: so he took his place at the president's right-hand, with agreeable anticipations—he was a great epicure in his way—and no sort of misgivings. The Colonel was absent; and the Major, senior officer.

Turnbull had been pursuing that day, and had got home late, after one of the long tedious hunting-runs peculiar to that country, beginning

and ending in woodland. The soup had been removed before he appeared in the mess-room. He was just taking his seat, near the centre of the table, with a few muttered words of apology, meant for the strangers present, when his eye lighted on Daventry.

The latter had never seen the Major before, to his knowledge. It was clear the ignorance was not mutual, for Turnbull started perceptibly; and for a moment, seemed as though he would have spoken: he thought better of it apparently, and sat down. But all through dinner his brow was dark and lowering; and he was very taciturn, replying as briefly as possible to the queries about sport, &c., and never volunteering an observation. His comrades would scarcely have noticed this—for the Major was subject to fits of silence sometimes—had it not been evident that there was some positive cause for his discontent. The Princess's Own kept up the good old-fashioned custom of taking wine, at least with the strangers present: this Turnbull omitted to do now, for the first time within the memory of the scanda-

lised mess-butler. Perhaps, indeed, the only soldier present who was not struck by Turnbull's strange demeanour was Daddy Goring; who was too immersed in his presidential duties to give any single individual more than a moment's attention: none of the three strangers chanced to be conversant with the particular point of mess etiquette.

So everything went on smoothly enough—if not very festively—till they adjourned into the ante-room; with the exception of the Major, who disappeared as soon as the move was made.

Whilst they were drinking their coffee, Goring and his guest began to talk about *écarté*. The subject seemed to come up quite accidentally; *apropos* of a certain doubtful point in the rules, which had lately been discussed in most of the sporting papers. Daventry took occasion to observe, that the question ought never to have been settled in England; for the simple reason that no Englishman was really a master of the game: he himself, he said, had learnt all he

knew from a French celebrity; and that was enough to give him an advantage over any ordinary Britisher.

Now, ever since the Daddy spent three weeks at Ostend, he had rather fancied himself at *écarté:* indeed he did play very tolerably in dashing hap-hazard sort of way; in camp and elsewhere, when they were brigaded with other regiments, he was always put forward as the champion of his corps; and had reaped no small profit and renown from some of these mild tournaments for merely nominal stakes: as was aforesaid, the Princess's Own didn't gamble. It was next to impossible to make him angry; but he was rather piqued, now, at the cool way in which Daventry ignored native talent. So he took up the glove readily enough, when the latter cast it down; proposing to play the best of eleven games "for something moderate; just enough to give one an interest in it; say—a tenner a game, and a pony on the rubber." These points were far beyond Goring's usual mark; but he could not bring himself to object, when the other fixed

them in this matter-of-course fashion: so the table was set out; and the battle began.

The wily Lawyer knew right well that, when the sympathies of the 'gallery' set strongly on one side, the original stake at issue is the merest trifle, compared to the bye and outside bets that may be got on. He foresaw exactly what would happen now. The Daddy was such a favourite in the corps, that very few, if any, of his comrades would have had the heart to wager against him, even if they had thought he was safe to lose. On the present occasion there were no such misgivings: the stranger's manner had rather prejudiced the company against him: they thought "he swaggered too much to be safe." So, before a card was dealt the regimental money went on in earnest—Leo Armytage heading the plungers, with bets that doubled the stakes at once; and the civilians followed, more modestly, their entertainer's lead. Daventry found himself in the very position that he desired; facing all the others, with no one overlooking his hand.

The confidence of Goring's backers seemed to

be justified: he won the first game in a walk; his adversary only scoring one point. They were too well-bred a lot, to exult aloud over a stranger; but a low murmur of satisfaction ran through the gallery; and there was interchange of meaning smiles, whilst six to five on the rubber was proffered freely. Daventry booked every bet as it was offered—they were not playing 'money down'—with a muttered word of assent, or a careless nod: he was shuffling the cards in preparation for the next deal, when a quiet voice said,—

"I think we have had almost enough of this."

The Lawyer looked up with a savage scowl; and met the stern grey eyes of old Alec Turnbull, who stood in the midst of the group gathered round Goring's chair, with a face that might have been carved in granite.

"I've seen a good many pleasant rubbers on our guest-nights," the Major went on—"and every one was satisfied with our regimental points. But in twenty years' service I've never seen anything like this. See now, boys: if you want to

gamble there are plenty of places to do it in, without turning your own ante-room into a 'hell.' No stranger has ever lost, or won, a heavy stake amongst us in my time; and never shall, if I can prevent it. I beg that this may be stopped at once."

Goring paused for a minute in some perplexity. It wasn't that he was much wrapped up in the match, now; indeed he felt rather sorry that it had ever been begun; but he did not like that a stranger should go away, and boast that he had cowed the Princess's Own with high wagering.

"It's only for once in a way, Major," he said, apologetically.

"Once too often," was the reply. "Look here, Daddy. I might speak as the senior officer present; perhaps I ought: but I don't. I speak only as the friend, who was an old captain when you joined. As a personal favour to me—stop this at once."

His hand fell on the other's shoulder as he spoke: a hard heavy hand enough; but its

touch was light and persuasive as a woman's now. Goring rose up with his honest face all a-glow.

"Don't say another word, Major. It's all over, if you take it in that way. I'd oblige you on a bigger thing than this, as you know right well. I'm very sorry, Mr. Daventry: it was entirely my fault, for going against regimental rules. The other fellows only followed my lead. I'm glad I won the first game: though it goes for nothing of course. It makes it easier to draw stakes, when I've a little the best of it."

A little the best of it! The poor Daddy spoke in perfect simplicity and good faith. He had no idea of the talents of the man who sat over against him. I believe, that adroit conjurer, could have made the King appear, not alone in any given part of the pack, but in the frame over the mantel that held the hunting-card, or between the quarters of a fresh muffin had he been so minded—

> Such cunning, those who dwell on high
> Have given to the Greek.

It was no wonder that the Lawyer's face should lower so savagely, when he saw the assured booty slip from his grasp. It was as much as he could do to control his temper, even partially.

"A match is a match," he growled out at last. "Of course you must do as your commanding-officer bids you, here. But I'll play it out whenever you like, elsewhere. At Mote, for instance."

With all his invincible good-humour, Goring had plenty of spirit and firmness: he was as little likely to be bullied into acting against his principles, as the most cross-grained martinet in the service. He did not like his visitor's tone at all; and his own manner showed this plainly enough, as he made a cold and curt reply, to the effect "that he should make no appointments at Mote without consulting Mr. Maskelyne; and that he considered the match postponed indefinitely; or rather—definitely at an end."

Daventry gnawed his lips in bitter anger: but he was cunning enough to see that he could not possibly make a decent quarrel out of the matter

as it stood. So muttering—"Have it your own way: it's all one to me—;" with a hoarse taunting laugh, he wheeled the chair round again to the fire; and reverted to strong drink and tobacco.

Of course, a great awkwardness and constraint hung over the whole party. Turnbull made an effort to carry on a conversation with the other strangers—he had scarcely glanced at the Lawyer since their eyes first met—and in this he was seconded by one or two of the captains; but the boys broke off into small groups, and spoke low amongst themselves; being evidently in much bewilderment. It was a great relief to every one, when Daventry—after resisting a mild attempt or two on the part of Goring to draw him into turf-talk—rose, and nodding a sulky adieu to all around, prepared to depart. It was a clear moonlight night; and he had already announced his intention of walking to his inn.

"I'll go with you as far as the gate—" Goring said.

His conscience, exceedingly tender on the point of hospitality, was smiting him at that

moment. He was sorry he had asked the man at all; but felt that the latter had been rather cavalierly treated.

As the other two went out, Turnbull threw on his cap, and followed; merely remarking to the man who sat next to him, "that he would be back directly; and they might have a quiet rubber after all."

"There's something devilish odd up, to-night—" Leo Armytage murmured to his bosom friend. "I don't half like the looks of the Daddy's guest. I shouldn't wonder if the Major has gone to have it out with him. What fun! I should so like to see old Alec give him pepper."

Turnbull caught up the others before they had crossed the barrack-square; but he walked on, silently, by their side; never opening his lips till they had passed the guard-room, and the gate had been opened. When they were fairly in the road without, he addressed Goring—not in the familiar tone that he had used a while ago; but in a measured formal voice, as if he had been giving an order on parade.

"You are not, of course, aware whom you have been entertaining to-night? I hope this will teach you to be more cautious in the selection of your guests. I never heard the Princess's Own accused of undue fastidiousness; but you must draw the line somewhere—for the regimental honour's sake, if not for your own. I knew that person the instant I came into the mess-room. But he had eaten of our bread and salt, and my mouth was closed whilst he was within the barrack-gates. Do you consider a ring-man of indifferent repute, who has been more than suspected of card-sharping, a fit associate for your brother officers? I know you better than to suppose, that our opinions could differ here."

The Daddy was more thoroughly taken aback than he had ever been in his easy-going life. Before he could answer, Daventry broke in—his face black and convulsed with passion.

"By G—d, I'll have the law of you for this! Do you dare to insinuate——"

The change in the Major's manner was abso-

lutely startling, as he turned rudely on the speaker.

"I insinuate nothing. I state my belief, plainly, that you are no better than a common card-sharper and swindler. Don't snarl and show your teeth, at me, you hound, if you want to get to kennel with whole bones. I tell you, that I was at Chester, sleeping in the same inn, the year when you and your gang won three thousand of young Halkit, at the very game you were playing to-night. I heard all about your sham colonel (he was a broken army-surgeon); and the looking-glass; and the rest of it. You might have won the boy's money without hocussing his drink, and half-murdering him. And you want to practise your infernal sleight-of-hand tricks, in the ante-room of the Princess's Own? Not—while I am to the fore. I went to my quarters to refresh my memory, from a diary, about that Chester business: but I got back in good time, you see."

"You shall prove your words;" Daventry said huskily.

"Prove them?" Turnbull retorted in huge disdain. "I can't prove them, any more than Halkit could prove that he was robbed and poisoned. He don't scruple to express his opinion though, about you and your confederates: neither do I. Proof? Look at his face, Daddy; and tell me if the proof isn't there—plain enough for any judge or jury?"

In truth, the Lawyer's features, unnaturally livid in the clear cold moonlight, told a tale easy to comprehend: conviction would not have been more complete if the working lips had confessed the villany. It was a face terrible to look upon, with its bitter malignity, and shrinking cowardice, and faint remnant of almost forgotten shame.

Goring did look as he was bidden; but he looked not long. That good fellow could not abide the sight of punishment or misery—however well deserved—any more than he could watch the handling of a surgeon's knife.

"Yes; I see you're right, major;" he muttered: "Right all through. I'm awfully sorry;

it's all my fault. But for God's sake come away. I can't stand this."

Turnbull linked his arm in the speaker's, and followed him, not unwillingly, through the gates which still stood open. The dialogue had not been loud enough greatly to edify the stolid sentry, pacing backwards and forwards on his beat close by. And Daventry stood staring vacantly, long after the gate had closed behind them—for the first time in his life too stunned to blaspheme.

Now this episode does not seem materially to bear upon the main story. Yet it does so, more than would appear. For Daventry returned to Mote, on the following morning, in a frame of mind so thoroughly fiendish, that the working of mortal harm to *some one*, became a matter of simple necessity. Thenceforward he was less guarded in his demeanor towards Mrs. Maskelyne: even in her husband's presence he was not careful to abstain from a familiarity scarcely warranted by kinsmanship; and daily engrossed more of her society. It is true that there was some

pretext for this; for they were generally together in her father's apartments: but the unhappy old drunkard, even if he chanced to be present, was no more of a check on the freedom of converse than an ugly piece of waxwork might have been.

With Brian, too, the Lawyer seemed inclined, of late, to stand on scant ceremony: he was sometimes almost aggressive, in his coarse sarcasms, and insolent assumption of intellectual superiority. It is not to be presumed that he acted thus deliberately or of a forethought. But a savage vindictive devil was raging within the man, and would have vent whether he would or no, when not restrained by personal fear. It is the same with all the Carnivora, whether they go on two feet or four. I suppose, if the King-brute could once be thoroughly tamed, he would be safe enough, so long as you treated him fairly: but the whip must be shaken, everlastingly, at the wolves and jackals.

The change in Daventry's manner towards her husband was so marked that Bessie took occasion to remonstrate thereon. The two were sitting

late one afternoon, in the deep, bay-window of Mr. Standen's presence-chamber; who was sleeping off his morning drink over the fire, in a stertorous doze. The Lawyer did not attempt to deny the imputation.

"I can't help it, Bess—" he said in his harshest tones. "I do hate him so. Even when he's at the pains to be civil—that isn't often—he's a way of looking out of his great melancholy eyes that makes my nerves tingle. I feel sometimes as if I'd give anything to leave my mark on that smooth white forehead of his. I believe I shall, before long."

And, as he spoke, his glance went downward to his own left hand, where sparkled the sharp bright diamond.

Now, with all her subjection to Daventry—a subjection dating from childhood—Mrs. Maskelyne was not a whit afraid of him: he could coax her to do anything on earth: but even by him she was not to be cowed. She knew that something had gone wrong, though she guessed not at the truth (for of the scene in Torrcaster

Barracks not a whisper had reached Mote, or was likely so to do); and she felt no more alarmed than if her cousin had shown signs of slight biliousness. It was a mere question, of having the proper remedies ready. So she shrugged her shoulders rather contemptuously, as she answered him.

"I do think your temper's getting worse every day, Kit. It's the old story, I suppose. You've been losing money, and want supplies. Well—it's just as easy to ask pleasantly, as to make yourself disagreeable beforehand. You can have *that* at all events: there's no difficulty about it, now."

There was a careless confidence in her manner that took the Lawyer rather by surprise, though he was careful not to betray this.

"You're wrong"—he said, still sullenly. "I'm not particularly hard up. But it's strange, to hear you talk in that *millionaire* style. Do you mean that you hold the purse-strings, and have blank cheques given you, that you needn't account for?"

"I mean just this. When we married there were no settlements, of course. You know, some were executed last year, and on a grand style too. But you *don't* know that, since then, Brian has settled £1500 a year on me—not pin-money, mind; but absolutely for my own use, with trustees and all the rest of it—for ever and ever. Poor boy! He never thinks of stint or counting, where I'm concerned. I told him, I couldn't spend a quarter of it; but he wouldn't listen. Now, perhaps you see why my own bank is good for a few hundreds, when they're wanted."

Daventry's face was sullen no longer; but, during the last few seconds it had grown very grave and thoughtful.

"And, you never told me of this?" he muttered.

"I didn't know it would have any particular interest for you"—she answered, with an indifference that was rather over-acted. "Besides, I fancied you'd have heard it from him."

A side motion of her head designated the sleeping figure by the fire.

"*He* tell one anything worth hearing?" the other retorted, with intense scorn. "Why, he'll forget his own name, before he's much older. Well, I never believed, till now, that husbands and their money were so soon parted. So that £1500 a year is yours, for life, Bess—*whatever happens?*"

"Mine—whatever happens."

Her voice never faltered as she spoke; yet her cheek flushed painfully. She knew well enough what those last words meant.

A blacker-hearted scoundrel than Christopher Daventry has seldom tainted this upper air; and Bessie Maskelyne was worse a thousand-fold than many who have died at stake or block. Shame or remorse could deter that pair, no more than the wave of crozier could avail, when—

> L'autel, et le Christ, l'abbesse et sa crosse,
> Tout evanouit dans un eclat de rire feroce.
> Et ceci fut l'exploit de Blas el Matador.

Yet, at that moment, neither cared to meet the other's eyes.

So there ensued rather an embarrassing silence;

during which Bessie moved away and began to set the fire in order; whilst the Lawyer gazed out into the deepening twilight, whistling a low monotonous tune. After a while he too rose; and—muttering something about 'letters to write before post-time'—went his way, without more words. Nor was the subject of their last discourse alluded to by either of the cousins during the two days which brought Daventry's visit to an end. He departed, not without a hint as to the probable necessity for his return at no very distant date. Those 'affairs' of Jem Standen's seemed a web marvellously hard to unravel—if, indeed, the process were not the reverse of Penelope's.

A great weight seemed lifted from the domestic atmosphere, when that evil presence had removed itself from Mote. It may be doubted, if even Mrs. Maskelyne did not feel a temporary relief. It is certain that her manner towards her husband was, for some time, unusually gracious and caressing. She could not be quite insensible to the forbearance he had displayed of late, entirely for her

sake; a forbearance, too, very foreign to his real character, which—wilful by nature—had waxed more so from perpetual indulgence. So she was disposed to reward him, after the careless desultory fashion in which certain very wealthy persons display their liberality — sowing charity broad-cast, out of a granary too vast for handfulls to be missed from the store.

Richer, surely, than the rifler of all earth's treasuries, is he, on whom a true woman—be she widow, wife, or maid—hath bestowed, from a free heart, the precious mite of love. How many men, I wonder, like Brian Maskelyne, having striven earnestly through life to attain that most excellent gift, die paupers, after all?

CHAPTER XI.

THE LITTLE LADY.

THERE is a strong muster in the breakfast-room at Charteris Royal, though the morning meal has been set a full hour earlier than usual. The plan of the day is evident; for three or four women, and almost all the men, wear riding-gear more or less business-like. Squire Braybroke's hounds draw Pinkerton Wood—a famous cover on the Charteris estate, though over the Marlshire border—and all that goodly company intend, in one fashion or another, to take the field.

There are a few additions to the house-party since you saw them last. Amongst these are Seyton of Warleigh, and Kate his wife. They are tolerably frequent guests here, at all seasons; but on this particular occasion Tom, at least, has

been invited for a special purpose, which will presently be made manifest.

Do you see that very small, slight woman near the lower end of the table; with flaxen hair braided closely round a pale, quiet face, quite child-like in diminutiveness of feature and innocence of expression; consuming her modest meal quickly, yet daintily withal, so that you are irresistibly reminded of some tiny bird feeding?

That is Alice Langton—better known in the Shires as "The Little Lady;" whose name stands first of all—if first there be—in the roll of English huntresses. She comes of a hard-riding Border blood. Her father, twelfth Earl of Cheviot, kept the hounds in his native county till he could hardly buy food for his kennel; the children of that house—boys and girls—were set in saddle almost before they could walk steadily. Lady Alice does her duty fairly in the state of life to which it has pleased Providence to call her; but her passion is the 'pursuit;' and she has been enabled, hitherto, to indulge it without serious loss or hindrance.

That is her husband; the grey-haired man, with a kind placid face, sitting over against her. Colonel Langton is an old Indian officer of some renown—rather scientific than martial. He took a fair fortune out with him to the East; and about doubled it there by judicious speculation. When he returned, with liver not seriously impaired, still on the sunny side of fifty, he was considered rather an enviable *parti*. He too was of the Border-country; the Langtons and Cheviots had been friends and allies for many generations: so, perhaps, it was not unnatural, that he should aspire to the Lady Alice's hand; though she was scarcely out of the school-room then, and the Colonel was but little younger than her father. At all events, she was not struck by the incongruity; for she accepted him cheerfully, and has never once regretted it since. They have been wedded some years, and have been perfectly happy in their quiet way, though no child has come to bind them closer together: some people say, it is as well this should be so.

Colonel Langton takes care that his wife shall be carried safely, if it is in the power of horse-flesh to insure it; and never dreams of grumbling at any price whatever. Three are amply sufficient for the needs of Lady Alice and her feather-weight of a groom—wherever she goes, men fight for the honour of mounting her—but these were nearly perfect when they were bought; and command a fabulous price, after a season's tuition under her famous 'hands.'

The Colonel rides almost invariably with his wife to cover; beyond this, his attendance is not deemed necessary. He wends his steady way homewards, so soon as the hounds have fairly found, and busies himself with some 'paper' that shall be spoken of hereafter in one of the societies—geographical, or antiquarian—of which he is an honoured Fellow.

He used to be rather nervous, at first, about his child-wife,—too much so, indeed, to settle comfortably to work on hunting-days; but use is everything. She has gone on riding so long, without any serious accident, that her husband

has implicit confidence in her science, courage, and good fortune; and the hours do not seem very long, now, that will bring her back to his dressing-room—brim-full of the triumphs or disappointments of the day.

Do not suppose that there is anything fast or 'horsey' about the Little Lady. If a captious critic were bound to find fault, he would probably say that her manner was a turn too quiet. The slang of the stable no more taints her language, than its odours hang about her garments. She leads the van of chase—calm and serene as that Arch-Huntress of old, in whom gods no less than men, revered the very type of Purity. The roughest of her field companions — gentle or simple—never let slip a coarse word or unseemly jest, wittingly, in Lady Alice's immediate presence; as for familiarity, or the faintest approach thereunto—she is as strange to such a thing, as Nelson was to fear.

But, with all her daring self-reliance, the Little Lady does not disdain a pilot on a strange country; and this is her first appearance with the

M. H. The distinguished honour of chaperoning her to-day, has fallen to Seyton of Warleigh. Tom is not only the crack rider of these parts; but —from long experience, added to a natural genius for topography—is supposed to carry in his head a sort of Ordnance-map, on a reduced scale; whereon the boundaries of every field in his county are plainly defined.

Our bonny Kate scans the fair stranger with just a little envy, but without the faintest tinge of jealousy; as she whispers to her next-door neighbour, an old Marlshire squire,—

"What a lucky woman she is—to be allowed to ride as she likes; and such horses too. She has brought all her own down, with her, you know. What a nice winning little face it is! I do so hope we shall have a run—a real quick thing; and that Tom will get her a good start. He's sure to do that, though. And don't you think there *must* be a scent to-day? I mean to watch Mrs. Gaysforde's face, when she sees Lady Alice appear: she'll soon find out who it is; and she'll get so dreadfully red and jealous; and be

so unhappy if she don't beat the stranger. Won't it be fun?"

To which the elder responds, after a pause and a struggle—he is slow of speech and mastication, and is busy on cold woodcock-pie—that——

"Time will show. There's no counting on scent, or women's fancies."

And chuckles laboriously over his threadbare joke.

At the very end of the long table, next to the host, is Lady Dorrillon; looking unutterably handsome, in a habit that fits her superb figure without a wrinkle, and a ravishing little round hat, set coquettishly though quite firmly, on the massive glossy braids beneath. You need scarcely be told who is her right-hand neighbour.

Vincent Flemyng got his orders for to-day, over-night. He is to squire Lady Dorrillon, who does not mean following the hounds, "unless he particularly wishes to ride up to them."

It would be hard to exaggerate the readiness,

with which Flemyng promised close and constant attendance on Flora's bridle-rein. Had no temptation held him back, he would have been perfectly miserable, if he had been expected to go straight. For he had no more nerve than a baby; and yet he would not have confessed this, for worlds. He had a fair excuse now—few ever had a fairer—for cleaving to the broad highways that lead not to destruction. Now, instead of being a butt for derision or banter, he must needs be a mark for all men's envy.

Should your eye perchance grow weary with gazing on one style of beauty, you have only to turn towards the hostess' end of the table, where the Fiametta presides; most becomingly, if fancifully, arrayed, in a sealskin Polonaise, with knots of dark-blue ribbon peeping out through muslin puffing, at neck and wrists. Marion is in radiant spirits this morning: she has never yet seen Ranksborough *ride:* and is full of anticipations thereanent; which she has already confided to their object. The latter, no doubt, is very much gratified; but he only betrays it by a

glance of languid gratitude, and a slow meaning smile; whilst he dallies with the grapes that, with a glass of pure water, always terminate his morning-meal. But in despite of that indifference, real or assumed, the Lord Denzil means business to-day. He gave special orders overnight as to his first horse; and could choose no better, if the meet were Crick Gorse or Tilton Wood.

Ere long, there is a general move, and a getting to horse or carriage, as the case may be. Marion plays propriety this morning—as she is fond of doing, *faute de mieux*—and takes Lady Greystoke in a barouche; of which Sir Marmaduke Dorrillon and Castlemaine fill the back seats.

John Charteris cares little for hunting himself; but he subscribes liberally to the hounds on the principle of supporting all time-honoured county-institutions; and—going out himself occasionally, as a matter of duty—encourages his guests to do likewise. His stud-groom is a treasure; and keeps his establishment well up

to the mark. If there are no hunters of renown in the vast stables of Charteris Royal, there are always jumping hacks enough to mount any moderate number of guests, who do not aspire to going quite in the front rank; besides a few steady cobs, suited to cautious sportsmen like Commissioner De Visme, who care not to trust their rotund persons too far from the ground. Furthermore, any who prefer it are welcome to bring their own horses: of this only Lady Alice Langton, Ranksborough, and Hardress, have availed themselves.

The last-named, over-night, was generous enough to offer a mount to Bertie Grenvil. The Cherub—knowing his customer—was rather surprised, but suitably grateful. The sense of obligation will be greatly diminished when he realises the nature of the gift-horse—an obstinate rusher, with only one side to his mouth, and that side almost unmanageable even by such masterly hands as will steer him to-day. Hardress bought him for a song out of a steeplechasing stable, and thinks he may possibly get a

fifty out of his purchase, by dint of schooling; which schooling he intends to see done by deputy, and gratuitously if possible. Luckily it is one of those cheery warm days—without being positively sunny — when Bertie's nerve stands to him well: in cold gloomy weather, as he himself plaintively avows, "a school girl might show him the way."

We will not linger on the portico-steps, though the scene is picturesque enough in its way. The three amazons were quickly mounted; Lady Alice and Kate being squired by their respective husbands; Flora Dorrillon by her lately installed favourite. Flemyng's hand trembled so, when the tiny foot was laid in its palm, that the 'taking off' was both frail and insecure: it was rather the elastic strength of the delicate round ancle, than any foreign assistance, that set the fair dame saddle-fast without mishap.

And so they wended their way to meet—a gallant company as we easily see—whither we, too, will follow.

Pinkerton Wood was rather a favourable spe-

cimen of a cover 'down in the clays;' where you can hardly expect trim gorse-islands in the midst of a gently swelling sea of pasture-ground. The extent might have been some sixty acres, with plenty of good lying in the centre and towards the lower side, where the under-growth was thickest of bramble, bracken, and sedge. It had the reputation of generally holding a straight-goer; besides, the road-riders and carriage-folk had a capital chance of seeing sport without spoiling it; for the Pinkerton foxes almost invariably went away across the broad vale below, which ended in a blunt cone just here; so that the spectators could follow a good deal of the run with glass or eye, by skirting the edge of the rising ground: they called it a 'hill' in these parts—Heaven save the mark!

You who have hunted, can fancy a meet 'in the clays' just as well as I could describe it; and others, the sketch would not greatly interest.

Of course the character of the horse-flesh out—with a few exceptions—differs materially from what you would see in the 'grass.' Blood is

invaluable in its way; but blood, alone, would be sorely wasted, indeed almost useless, in this deep, strongly-fenced country; with its aggravating small enclosures, where one has to be jumping everlastingly, and jumping in and out of plough. Blood and bone together, are beyond the means of any but a very few of the Marlshire squires and yeomen; so the most ambitious are fain to content themselves with such cattle as will carry them decently near their own hounds.

These, likewise, are bred rather for stoutness than speed: they are a pretty level lot, as you see—too big for most tastes; but well up to their rough work; and they can race a bit, too, when they get upon the light land, which is found in a small division of the county.

Right seldom, hereabouts, are seen such costly animals, as those that the Little Lady and Ranksborough are riding to-day—to say nothing of Hardress; who has a cheap two hundred guineas'-worth under him.

The beautiful dark chestnut, curving her shining neck to meet the caress of the tiny

gauntleted hand, has had more than one Queen's Plate credited to her in her time; and, if price could have tempted Colonel Langton, she would have been put to work again in a great steeple-chasing stable, two years ago. They who go for thorough-breds and nothing else, point triumphantly to 'Camilla,' in answer to such sceptics as deny that animals who have been regularly trained can ever make perfectly pleasant hunters.

Of a very different stamp, though equally superb in his way, is Ranksborough's favourite, 'St. Dunstan.' The soft full curves, essential to equine, no less than to feminine beauty, are wanting here. In their stead you see a massive squareness of perfect proportion, betokening vast muscular power, combined with a rare turn of speed. St. Dunstan's colour,—a rich blue-roan once—has waxed lighter now by several silvery shades; for this is his sixth season: he has won two Hunt cups for Ranksborough, besides several matches for heavy stakes, 'owners up;' and has taken his hunting-turn, twice a fortnight

regularly, without once being sick or sorry, or impairing his fame by an absolute fall. His temper is uncertain, without being savage or sulky; and there are days when for ten minutes or so he will jump only on compulsion; but he has to deal with sharp spurs and hands of iron; and he has never once got much the best of a wrangle. In his present service the good horse will surely die; for men have got tired of tempting Ranksborough with fabulous prices, which only elicit a few curt words of rejection, pointed with a contemptuous smile.

Such cattle as these—to say nothing of their riders—would be sure to attract attention in any country. No wonder that as, leading the mounted party from Mote, they emerge into the forty-acre field, there is a stir, and murmur of admiration, in the group already gathered round the hounds. There are few better judges of horse-flesh than the Marlshire yeomen.

Mr. Braybroke advances to meet the new-comers, with a little more earnestness than usual in his cordial courtesy. Others, perchance, may

surpass the Squire's salute in grace or dignity, when he enters a saloon, or lounges near the Rails; but the sweep of his cap, from the saddle, is simply perfection; and has won, they say, approving smiles from Royalty itself. He knows all the Mote party, saving the Lady Alice; to her he is presented at once, by Seyton, with due form and ceremony. Frank's handsome face flushes like a boy's with pride and pleasure, as he does the honours of the M. H. to the distinguished stranger; and "hopes to show her some sport, not quite unworthy of her riding."

One glance, however, rests on the Little Lady, neither amicably nor admiringly; it is levelled through a glass, screwed into the crook-handle of a very business-like hunting-crop; that crop is grasped in the large well-formed hand of yonder imposing amazon, who sits her powerful bay so squarely.

Mrs. Gaysforde owns to a liberal 'forty off:' her proportions, always luxurious, have developed themselves, in spite of constant hard exercise, somewhat inconveniently of late; but her ruddy

and cheerful countenance glows only with natural health; and her bright eyes dance still, jocundly as ever. She is the most good-natured easy-tempered creature living, in all respects save one. She can't bear to be beat by any woman, over her own country. In truth this feat has very seldom been accomplished. With an intermission of five years, she has not missed a season with the M. H. since her girlhood; and her fame has gone on waxing instead of waning: no native rival has arisen, whose pluck and science could wrest the lead from Bell Gaysforde, and keep it. She is a good deal heavier than in the old days; but her horses are well over her weight; while her nerve and hands are trustworthy as ever.

The gap in her hunting-diary above referred to, occurred immediately after her marriage to a very wealthy grazier in the North Country. There she resided, contentedly enough—though the wild open moor-land was a sore trial to her, and she scarcely cared to ride over it—till a sudden pleurisy carried off her husband, and left

her a wealthy childless widow. As soon as she had set her house in order and could prudently move, Mrs. Gaysforde came back to her own people, without any pretence of inconsolable sorrow. She might have married a dozen times since; but prefers to 'leave well alone;' and has kept house ever since for her brother—yonder burly parson, with a keen hard-bitten face, and close-cropped iron-grey hair—who is glad to share her affluence, and proud to pilot her across country. With a very slight effort the pair might have pushed their way upwards into the ranks of the squirearchy; but neither cared to be at such pains; they were content to seek such society as they needed, amongst the better of the good old yeoman-stock from which they themselves had sprung.

The anticipations of that mischievous Kate were quickly realised. It must be owned that the rich damask on the buxom widow's cheek deepened by three shades, as she scanned the small quiet-looking stranger, after being made aware of her name. The Little Lady's renown

was so thoroughly established, that Mrs. Gaysforde could not pretend to ignore it; and, sooth to say, the aspect of both horse and rider impressed her considerably; nevertheless she came up to time, with a valiant effort; and sniffed defiance, if not disdain.

"Yes—they look like going"—she muttered. "And they'd be hard to beat over the grass I dare say. Though how those baby-hands can hold a horse together, quite puzzles me. But I don't believe in the Shire cracks holding their own, for long, hereabouts. They *will* try to fly everything; and about the fourth bank always brings them to grief. Don't you remember Miss Ormsby, Ben—the handsome dark-haired girl, who came down from Lincolnshire, to show us all the way? She didn't make much of a hand of it, you'll remember."

Now the reverend Benjamin Bartram was something saturnine of temper, and apt to look on the seamy side of most matters. The world had gone smoothly enough with him of late; but he had had hard uphill work for many a year,

when—being one of eleven children—he was fain to struggle on, as best he might, on a curate's stipend. He was singularly niggard of encouragement as a rule, and made answer now, rather sourly.

"I don't know so much about that. The mare looks as if she could go over any country; and the lady didn't get her name for nothing, I'll be sworn. The Ormsby girl never rode cattle like yonder one; and she hadn't Tom Seyton to pilot her. That's about the mark of it this morning; unless I'm much mistaken. Besides, Bell—you give lumps of weight away.

The jovial widow was not a whit disconcerted at the fraternal frankness: perhaps she was used to it: indeed, as you will have already observed, both were more forcible than elegant in the manner of their speech.

"You're right there, Ben," she replied with perfect gravity. "But I've a good stone in hand on Oakapple; and he never was fitter. Anyhow we can but do our best. I'm not afraid—if you are. Don't take your eye off Tom Seyton, whilst

we're drawing: they shan't get the better of the start, at all events. Hold Oakapple's head, for a minute, will you?"

Thus having delivered herself, the lady enacted a certain ceremony, very significant to such as had witnessed it before. From the recesses of a deep saddle-pocket she drew forth a small morocco case; from which she produced a pair of the lightest and neatest gold-rimmed spectacles that ever were seen. These she proceeded to adjust with great deliberation and composure: the effect was rather quaint, yet not altogether unbecoming to the comely countenance. She had been a little short-sighted from a child; but the glass let into the buck-horn handle of her whip was sufficient for any ordinary emergencies: when the spectacles were donned, all the hunting-world of Marlshire knew that Bell Gaysforde meant business in earnest.

There is a goodly show of carriages of all descriptions, in the great pasture where the hounds are still lingering, for the turf is sound and the approaches easy; whilst the Squire—

considering this a sort of show-meet—gives the dawdlers and danglers ten minutes' law.

You may guess, that there is no more attractive equipage on the ground, than that of La Reine Gaillarde, especially as Blanche Ellerslie reclines by her side. In spite of their little jealousies, and occasional heartburnings, they are great allies—those two; having many sympathies and plots in common. In the tiny hind-seat is perched Leo Armytage, who plays groom for to-day, and seems to like his part amazingly: the professional being in attendance as out-rider.

The boy looks very interesting, with his left arm in a sling of crimson silk: he had a rattling fall last week, and sprained his wrist badly; so that he cannot take the saddle at present. At least so says the sufferer himself; though divers of his comrades—envious of his present position—won't have it at all; asserting that, "it's all a sham, Leo's keeping on the sick-list. It's only because he wants to be petted." Which want, according to all appearances, is not unlikely to be supplied.

So, perhaps, thinks Colonel Vereker Vane, who, for the last ten minutes, has been vainly trying to cut in; so as to intercept—if not divert—the current of nods and becks and smiles and whispers, that passes incessantly between the fore and hind seats of the pony-phaeton. But the cunning coquette whom, he flattered himself, he had tamed, has evidently glided out of the toils; and is free as air again, to rove according to her wicked will. She has neither eyes nor ears for her sometime adorer to-day; and answers his questions only with careless languid monosyllables, that scarcely break the even flow of her fresh flirtation. Vereker would never have forgiven you, if you had suggested, that he could, by any possibility, be jealous of his beardless subaltern: nevertheless he would not dare to pry too closely into his own breast, just now. The *Sabreur's* discomfort is further increased by the unsociable behaviour of the fiery chestnut he is riding. The brute—naturally nervous like most of his colour—is a little above himself to-day; he keeps sidling and curveting

about till the ponies, corrupted by the evil example, begin to fret in their turn; and Vane, for very shame, is forced to take ground to the right, far beyond ear-shot of his tormentress.

To him, at least, it is rather a relief when Frank Braybroke announces that the time of grace is up, with a significant nod to the huntsman; and the hounds,—trooping to Will Griswold's "Cop away: cop"—lead off towards Pinkerton Wood, about a furlong distant.

You never noticed perhaps, in the crowd, our old acquaintance Tony Cannell. There the man-mountain sits in his high roomy gig, with his famous grey trotter in the shafts. Tony is an indefatigable 'pursuer' on wheels; and generally sees enough of a run, to know how his own horses are going.

"You may break their necks if you like; but make 'em *jump*," is his usual formula.

Much in these words he has just addressed his head-man—or rather boy—to whom is entrusted the pleasant task of steering a raw raking five-year-old over about the stiffest on-and-off

country in England. And the lad answers, "All right, master;" just as cheerily, as if bones were made of gutta-percha, and necks were spiral springs. As the crowd begins to file off, and the road becomes a little clear, the old dealer draws up alongside of the Brancepeth phaeton.

"Beg your pardon, my lady"—he says: (Tony bestows this title freely on every female above the rank of farmeress) "if you don't mind follow'in' me, I think I can put you right. I've been here afore, when the wind set steady, as it does to-day."

Laura Brancepeth thanks him, with her own familiar nod and smile; and, getting her ponies well in hand, rattles off in the track of the flashing gig-wheels; at a pace that will make even the trotting mare look alive, if she would keep her lead.

CHAPTER XII.

A CRACKER OVER THE CLAY.

Now nothing is easier—on paper—than to bring off a run just to suit the congruities of place and time. Nevertheless such things do happen in real life sometimes. I, who write, not two years ago, saw the run of the season with a certain famous North Country pack: the meet was within six miles of the cathedral-city, where two-thirds of the vast and goodly company present had been treading measures till day-break. So it need not seem too strange to be true, if similar luck befall the actors in this drama of ours.

There was a faint whimper, deepening into a prolonged note, and swelling soon into a rattling chorus, before the hounds had half drawn Pinkerton Wood: in three minutes more, Will Griswold —with a scream that made every ear within shot

of him tingle again—views the fox across a narrow green ride.

"It's the old customer, by G—d"—says the huntsman, smiting his thigh with unusual energy. "I'd know his grey sprinkle among a thousand."

A straight-goer evidently; but the hounds are too close on his track, to leave him much choice or chance of 'hanging.' Long before the unfortunates, who are always at issue with their girths or reins or stirrup-leathers, can settle into their saddles, another holloa in rounder and fuller tones, from the lower corner of the wood, gives notice that the fox has broken in the best possible line—right over the vale.

"Come on, my lord"—says Jim Stileman, Cannell's show rider, as Ranksborough hesitates for a second or two, in the broad middle-ride (he invariably goes into cover with the hounds). "We've got no time to lose. That was Squire Seyton viewed him away. He's allus in the right place somehow."

And, with no more ado, the two go crashing through high-fell and underwood, till they blun-

der over the blind boundary-fence into a wide sloping pasture. The pack are hardly got together yet; and Seyton knows better, than to steal away with five or six couple; so that Ranksborough and about a score more, start fair with him, after all.

Tom has found time to bestow several words of counsel and encouragement on his charge, to to whom he has already conceived a very great interest: indeed a harder heart might have been won by her manner and smile; as she avowed herself "quite safe in his care: if he didn't mind being troubled with her."

"I have never before been so honoured, Lady Alice"—Seyton answered, in his simple straightforward way: "so I don't know how I shall acquit myself. But I wouldn't change places with any man out; I know. We shall have some awkward fencing to-day; for the ditches hereabouts are as deep as main-drains; and the banks are narrow, and not always sound. But if your mare is as clever as you say she is, she'll soon learn where to put her feet, by watching old

Adamant. This is his third season; and he's only given me two falls, which were both my fault. We've the pace of everything out, I feel sure, unless it's St. Dunstan; so that we can easily make up lee-way, if we have to skirt a little."

"If you'll promise to go exactly as if you had no troublesome stranger to chaperon, I shall be quite satisfied"—Lady Alice said. "Please do promise that: I shall be quite unhappy if you don't."

Seyton looked steadily in her clear blue eyes for a second or more: what he saw there seemed to satisfy him.

"Yes — I'll promise that" — he answered. There was scant time for compliments; for, just then, the first hound spoke on cover; and thence-forward both kept discreet silence, till the fox broke within a rod or so of their horses' feet.

So they sweep down the gentle incline, and across the broad level vale beneath; the real front-rankers drawing steadily and surely away from the rest, as men will do who, picking their

place in the next fence as they land in each field, make their point without flinch or swerve; the others dropping gradually back to the 'ruck' that are still swarming out of Pinkerton Wood.

As yet there is no jealousy about the lead; for the pace, though fast enough for most people, is not exactly racing; and even Ranksborough is too good a sportsman to press on hounds, especially in a strange country. He and Will Griswold are riding nearly abreast on the left, with Jim Stileman in close attendance: on the right, Seyton and Lady Alice have certainly a little the best of it: Parson Bartram and his sister are lying well up; evidently biding their time. But the widow's comely face is cloudy with care, as she watches Camilla gliding over the deep ground, as easily as if it were the soundest turf; and sees her take an awkward double ditch in her stride; just dropping her hind-legs on the narrow bank mid-way.

"We shan't get the measure of her just yet, Ben"—Mrs. Gaysforde remarks; ranging up alongside of her brother, for an instant.

To which his Reverence nods a sulky assent;

and bids her—"mind where she's going to, instead of chattering: for there's a lot of blind grips ahead."

Right through the centre of the vale runs the Swarle; a navigable stream (though never used as such) at most seasons, and swollen, now, with heavy recent rains. You can trace its course, very plainly, by the coarse rushy meadows that, on either bank, lie betwixt the tilth and the water's edge. For awhile the hounds run parallel with the river; but suddenly they turn abruptly towards it; and Tom Seyton speaks, for the first time since they went away.

"It's the old Pinkerton fox, Lady Alice. I thought I knew him, when he broke cover: he's gone right over the Swarle; he served us that trick last year, and beat us at last. There's a ford in the next meadow but one: it'll be too deep for comfort, I fear; but the bridge is half a mile higher. Shall we try it?"

"The ford, of course:" says the Little Lady. "I suppose the river is *quite* impracticable, here?"

"Utterly so: it's over-head close under the banks; and a muddy bottom to boot. No one in his senses would attempt it. But—by Jove, I don't know—we've got one madman out, if not two. I hope to Heaven they'll come to no serious grief; and they can gain little by it, either; for the fox is bound to turn to us when we get over, if he keeps on sinking the wind."

Will Griswold had realised the state of things quite as soon as Seyton did; and, as he himself wheeled towards the right, cried out to Ranksborough warningly,

"That's the Swarle right ahead of us, my lord. It's no use looking at it: it's hardly to be done at the best o' times; and it's coming down in flood to-day."

Denzil nodded his head, to show that he heard; but never turned it. If you had been near enough you might have seen his slumberous eyes light up like fire-balls: here was a rare chance of cutting down a field—a strange field too, or nearly so; for he had not often shown in Marlshire—and Marion Charteris, perchance, within ken. The tempta-

tion was too strong: he stroked St. Dunstan's brawny shoulder, and spoke a few words in the low caressing tone that the old horse knew right well; and so rode down straight at the water.

But he rides not down—alone. Another man singles himself out from the front-rank, as they, too, all bend to the right; and comes hurling over the plashy meadow at headlong speed; actually racing with Ranksborough for the perilous honour of 'first in.' That other is Vereker Vane.

He was a well-conditioned *Sabreur* in the main; but his best friends allowed that 'it was the devil and all to pay' when his temper was fairly roused; as was, surely, the case this morning. In addition to other crosses, he had been very unlucky in the start; and had been forced to make desperate running, to catch the first flight when he did. But even this sharp gallop had not brought 'The Plunger' comfortably to his bridle; he was still boring and tearing at the reins, in a fashion that must have tired the patience of a saint. (Alas!

out of W——shire, saints are rarely found in the saddle.) Vane was neither a cockney nor a coward; so it never occurred to him to seek a vent for his wrath, in ill-usage of the animal he rode: nevertheless he did think that The Plunger would be none the worse for a lesson.

"So you *won't* stand still when you're asked?" says the Colonel, through his set teeth, as they splash over the meadow. "And you *will* pull one's arms off while you're going. Your blood wants cooling my friend—so does mine, for that matter. We'll see if the Swarle will do it for us. I don't see why my lord is to have all the bathing to himself."

He has caught Ranksborough by this time, and they reach the river-brink, nearly at the same instant about thirty yards apart.

The most dauntless of mortals—not utterly desperate—might stand excused, for 'looking before leaping' here. Yet, truly, the longer you looked the less you would have liked it. Can anything be more discouraging than that murky water—red-brown save where it is flecked with

paler foam-clots—swashing to the very lip of the treacherous banks with slow smooth swirls?

But Ranksborough—who either by luck, or judgment has struck a spot where there is a slight shelve—puts St. Dunstan at it without a second glance; first knotting the reins to prevent a tangle. The old horse, when he does refuse, always does so at a small place, on the 'I could if I would' principle: he has too much sense, or proper pride, to play the fool on an occasion like this. So he slides in quite coolly, and strikes off like a water-spaniel; keeping his head well up the current, which is rather sullen than strong.

It is very easy to write about horse-swimming, or even to give instructions thereanent; but—*experto crede*—the early practical lessons are rather difficult. I don't think you have an idea of the elasticity of water, till you have felt it insinuating itself under and round your person; gently constraining you to part company with saddle, if not with steed.

But those two have evidently 'taken soil' to-

gether ere now; and there is little fear but that they will reach the farther bank, towards which they are making steady way: how they will get out, is another matter.

It fared not so well with Vereker Vane. He was not so lucky in his place, to begin with; for everywhere near him, the banks were broken and steep. He was too proud to follow exactly in Ranksborough's track; so he tried to force The Plunger in just where he stood. The horse braced himself on his forelegs, till they grew rigid as iron bars; and snorted convulsively, as he shivered from crest to fetlock; steel and whip-cord were plainly worse than useless; for both are cruelly wasted on an agony of fear. Vane knew this: indeed, he never once lost his head, though he was no more to be warned back from his purpose than a mad Malay. He seemed to yield to The Plunger's refusal for an instant; but, as the animal wheeled away inland, a sharp wrench of the right rein made him rear perforce: they were so close to the edge that but one thing could happen—the thing that

Vereker intended. The bank gave way under the sudden shock of the hind-hoofs; and horse and rider slipped backwards; the last-named being undermost as they sank.*

Happily, the water was deep enough to make drowning the chiefest danger. But, even with this given in, Alec Turnbull very nearly stepped into another death-vacancy. And had it been so, I wis, there would not have been a sadder heart in the Princess' Own than the honest Major's.

The first object that showed on the surface was the fore-part of a remarkably neat boot—Vane was specially choice in his hunting attire—and then the struggling bodies of man and horse, jumbled together after a horribly grotesque fashion. But three or four labourers happened to be ditching, close by; and had left their work

* The rest of the word-painting must take its chance; but I am anxious that certain hunting-scenes should not seem—to *hunting men*—over-coloured. Lest this incident should appear so, I take leave to remark, that it did actually occur as described here, not far from Windsor, about a score of years ago. Perhaps some, then serving in the Household Brigade, may not yet have forgotten it; any more than some old Etonians will have forgotten 'Fighting Douglas.'

in open-mouthed wonder, to watch the two riders making straight for the Swarle. By a piece of luck verging on the miraculous, these worthy men did not lose their wits and presence of mind just when these were most wanted. One of them, who could swim, plunged boldly into the river, and caught The Plunger's bridle, at great risk of being himself struck down; whilst the others ventured in, with clasped hands, far enough to help their comrade, and drag the whole group to shore.

It was five minutes or more before his rare pluck and physical strength, aided by copious draughts from his hunting-flask, brought Vereker Vane sufficiently to himself, to thank and reward his deliverers. He did the first curtly enough; the second—so liberally, that the entire party, their friends, and neighbours, spent the next fortnight in an unbroken drink. The Plunger was scarcely in better case; but we need not follow the pair plodding slowly and wearily homewards.

The splash reached Ranksborough's ear as he neared the further bank: he turned his head, and

frowned slightly—this was his usual way of expressing concern—but the idea of returning to give assistance, never crossed his mind. He was not cruel or particularly unfeeling; but he had a high idea of the tough vitality of the human frame; in which, perhaps, he was justified by a long course of experiments on his own. They did not land without a struggle: but Ranksborough vaulted off cleverly, directly they touched ground; and helped St. Dunstan up, with voice and hand. Very soon the old horse stood by his master's side: shaking himself and snorting triumphantly; and, without more ado, the pair went sailing off again; on the best possible terms with themselves, and the world in general: though it *was* somewhat hard to see the hounds, after puzzling a little in the meadow, bend off towards the right, as if on purpose to let the forders—if not the bridge-riders—in. But it is a truism to remark, that less often in the chase, than in any other pursuit, does singular daring meet with adequate reward.

That same ford did not look over-tempting,

when Seyton rode down upon it; leading the score or so who scorned to make for the safer bridge-road. Tom indeed glanced back at his fair charge, rather doubtfully. But she only nodded her head in evident impatience; and, gathering up her skirt—short enough already—went in almost abreast with Adamant. They got safely through, as did the rest; though the water was more than girth-deep, and laved high over the shining instep of the Lady Alice's dainty hunting-boot.

As was aforesaid, the hounds were turning to them; so they lost scarce any ground; and Will Griswold was up just when he was wanted: it was the briefest check conceivable; and a timely holloa was hardly needed to set the ball rolling merrily again.

Now the real jealous riding begins. Ranksborough, of course, is less than ever to be denied: indeed his late feat had so impressed the field (though they were too busy to notice how it was managed) that none cared to contest the lead with him on the left. Even the huntsman is content

to follow in his wake: muttering, every now and then, a meek caution—

"Not *too* fast, my lord. Give 'em a *little* time"—rather to assert his own position, than because he is seriously afraid of Denzil's over-riding the hounds, who are carrying a tremendous head just now.

On the right the Little Lady still keeps her place, close to Seyton's quarter, who decidedly leads. But the native amazon is creeping up closer and closer; forcing the Parson on, whether he will or no: it is clear that Marlshire means to try conclusions with the stranger ere long. The most provoking part of it is, that Lady Alice seems so utterly unconscious of rivalry.

"If she'd only looked round once, to see where I was, my dear"—Bell Gaysforde said afterwards, with a passionate sob—"I'd have tried to forgive her."

So, for half a league or more, they bore straight along the southern slope of the vale, which lies nearly due east and west; but, near some farm buildings, the hounds began to bend somewhat

abruptly to the left: it was clear that the fox had crossed the crest of the rising ground. Directly they turned, Seyton took a pull at his horse, and dropped back alongside his charge.

"We must steady them a bit, here"—he said. "At least, *I* must. You'll see why, presently. Conacre is his point now—five good miles away—and he'll about make it, if he's not headed in the road above there."

Lady Alice did as she was bidden, without comment or question: so it happened, that Parson Bartram and his sister took the next fence—a flying one—in front; and held their lead over the pasture beyond. As they landed in the second field, the reason for Tom's sudden fit of caution became plain.

Right across their line, stretched an apparently endless flight of ugly black rails; high and tough enough to spoil the appetite of the veriest glutton at timber-jumping—to say nothing of the take-off being against the hill. To the extreme left-hand corner, almost out of sight, was a gateway. Parson Bartram, followed by

his sister, made straight for this, without hesitation: so did every one else, with the exception of some half-dozen, who held straight on. Seyton and Lady Alice were amongst these last.

But, when Tom was within seventy yards of the timber, his stout heart sank within him; not —as you can well believe—with personal fear. He had only once, himself, jumped those rails (indeed they had not long been put up to their present height): then, the ground was with him; and he remembered right well, with what a rattle and scramble he got over. He dared not take the responsibility of leading the delicate little being, who had followed him thus far so fearlessly, into such a risk of life and limb. So, with a heavy sigh—for he guessed what a block there would be in the gateway ere they could hope to reach it—he began to bear off to the left. But, before he had fairly turned, a sweet clear voice spoke, startlingly close to his ear.

"Straight on: quite straight, please. I know we can do it."

Looking over his shoulder, Seyton met—he

has not forgotten it yet—the pretty childish face, still wearing its bright confident smile; and the blue eyes, resolute as death.

"I never in my life was thoroughly nervous, till that minute," Tom said afterwards. "But I had no choice in the matter: you *can't* flinch, with a woman like that behind you. So I pulled Adamant together, as well as I could, and sent him at it, with a will. He did all he knew, poor old boy! But he hit it with every leg he had, I can tell you. I looked round before I had well picked him up; and just caught Camilla in the air. I give you my honour, she never rattled a hoof; and landed as light as thistledown. As the mare settled to her stride again, Lady Alice stroked her with that absurd little baby-hand; and said—'Very prettily done, my pet' as coolly as if five feet of stiff timber were the sort of thing to take in an exercise-gallop. I didn't get my breath again till we were close on the next fence, I know."

A second or two later, comes from the left the dull, cracking sound, too familiar to every hunt-

ing-ear. Ranksborough always goes fearfully fast at timber; on the simple principle that "what you can't jump, you may break;" and he illustrates his theory triumphantly now, by smashing a tough top-rail like a pipe-stem: St. Dunstan is down on his head; but, between them, they save a fall cleverly. Thereupon Will Griswold and three others, who have been waiting on Denzil on the chance of some such contingency, harden their hearts and go gallantly at the gap. One other man takes it in a fresh place; and comes into the field beyond in a ghastly crumpled heap. That is Jim Stileman, for any even money; and you may bet, with equal safety, on his coming to time within five minutes; not a whit the worse for a fall that would have laid up you or me for the rest of the season.

How fares it, meanwhile, with the bold and buxom widow? Truly, not so well as her many friends could wish. There is no padlock on the gate; but the hook is jammed in the staple. So that the Parson is fain to dismount—muttering certain anathemas, that would scarce be approved

of by Convocation. Whilst he is still tugging, he is startled by a faint cry from his sister, echoed by a murmur of surprise from the crowd already closing in between them.

Mrs. Gaysforde's handsome eyes are filling with angry tears.

"Oh, Ben,"—she says, almost sobbing. "She —*she means to have it, after all!*"

The Parson looks up just in time to see the big leap taken; the sight gives him energy to wrench the obstinate iron from its hold; and, as he scrambles to saddle, he grumbles out—half admiringly—

"Well—they deserve to get the lead: and they'll keep it too. Look how the hounds are turning; and the scent bettering every minute. We'll never fairly catch 'em again before they get to Conacre, unless a check lets us up."

To which Bell Gaysforde answers never a word; she gallops on mechanically with the rest; but the steel is out of her for to-day. Why be hard any longer on poor honest Oak-apple? Even if they catch the others again, and she

should hold her own with the stranger thenceforward, will that lighten the sense of defeat which lies heavy on her soul? If it were not for fear of ridicule, and of her brother, she would make straight home at once.

There, with many wishes for her better luck in future, we will leave the discomfited amazon. We may safely get forward, even ahead of the racing pack; for they who have eaten of fern-seed need not fear heading the fox.

The manner of Kate Seyton's hunting has been before alluded to. She was usually wont to make her points for herself, and ride after her own inventions. But to-day, she had entrusted herself to other guidance. Old Ralph Swynnerton—Kate's neighbour at breakfast—had been a noted rider in his day; and managed still to see more sport than most people, despite of increasing flesh and infirmities. He was rather crabbed in the field; and seldom liked to be put on escort-duty; so when he offered to pilot Mrs. Seyton, she took it as a great compliment, and accepted readily. Before the hounds were thrown into

cover, those two had crept down a bye-lane that led them wide of the wood, on the right through some arable-land, till they came down on the Swarle, close to the bridge above alluded to.

"If they come over the vale, we shall see as much of it as anyone," old Ralph said. "And, with this start, we can make our points pretty much as we choose. If they go dead up-wind, we're done for. But it's five to one against that. I shouldn't wonder if they went right over the water. A Pinkerton Wood fox took that line last year; and he may be back again in his old quarters, for aught we know."

You may fancy Kate's satisfaction as she watched the early part of the run; and saw how capitally they were placed for seeing more of it. But her cavalier betrayed no sign of content till the hounds bore straight for the Swarle. Then he indulged in a gruff chuckle of triumph.

"What did I tell you?" he said. "Come on, Mrs. Seyton: we've no time to lose."

They were over the vale, and safe out of

harm's way on the opposite rising-ground, long before the pack—or possibly, the fox—crossed their line. So they rode along the ridge, parallel with the 'hunt,' for some distance; till Mr. Swynnerton checked his horse suddenly at the corner of a broad green lane.

"Hold hard, ma'am. If we get much forwarder, we might head him. Conacre's his point, for a thousand."

They did not stir till the hounds had turned, as described above, and were coming right up to them: then they trotted sharply on again, towards the point in the lane where the hounds seemed likely to cross it.

"Look there," said old Ralph, with his grim smile—"we're not far out: that's where the fox went by not two moments back,"—he points to where some sheep have just scurried together under a row of wheat-stacks. "Now, let's see who has the best of it. They've come a cracker, over the stiffest part of the vale."

In another second or two Kate has dropped her reins, and very nearly her whip, as she

clasps her hands in a tumult of excitement; and her merry voice rings out like a silver bugle.

"Who has the best of it? Why, *we* are leading by a hundred yards; even Lord Ranksborough is not in the same field; and the rest are hardly in sight. Oh, Mr. Swynnerton; did you see the way they took that last fence—a double ditch I'm certain—wasn't it perfect?"

Kate's triumph is not exaggerated. It is as she has said. On the right, nearly level with the racing pack, Tom Seyton is cutting out all the work; and still seems going at his ease. Close on his quarter—the fresh bloom scarcely deepened on her cheek; and not a hair in her trim braids dishevelled—comes the Little Lady. Ranksborough was nearly brought to grief a few fields back in a boggy landing; and dares not press St. Dunstan too hard to make up his lost ground; for that swimming-match is beginning to tell upon the good horse, in spite of his gameness.

The hounds flash across the turf-road like lightning; but their heads go up on the field

beyond; for they are somewhat puzzled by the sheep-foil.

As Tom lands in the lane, he holds up his hand mechanically (for Lady Alice needs no warning); and his quick eye, roving to left and right, lights on his wife, just as the latter pushes forward to join him.

"You here, my Kate? This is better than I expected; though I knew you were in Swynnerton's charge. We've had *such* a quick thing so far—over such a country! We've burst him so too, that I don't think he'll get to Conacre today. If Will were only up, to put 'em forrard!" He lowered his voice here. "I'd give a cool hundred that Lady Alice should see a kill in the open. You've no notion how she rides."

For a second or two, Mrs. Seyton gazes into her husband's glowing face very fondly and proudly: then her expression changed; and became plaintive—not to say piteous.

"Mayn't I go a little way with you, Tom—just for this once? That's nothing of a place"—she pointed to the fence out of the

lane—" and the country looks so light and open beyond."

It was a great feat of moral gymnastics, when Seyton braced himself to the baulking of any one of his wife's fancies: reasonable enough they were, as a rule. It was almost too much to expect, even from her sweet temper, that she should contentedly see her husband ride off to chaperon a stranger; leaving her planted there. Just at that moment the hounds went off at score; aud all Tom's prudent scruples vanished like smoke.

" Come along, then, darling," he said. " But for Heaven's sake don't be rash. And if we come to a big place, you *must* go for a gate: there are plenty, just behind us, to keep you in countenance. Hold up, Adamant!"

And they are off full sail again, with Ranksborough close up; but with a good field's start of Will Griswold and the foremost of the second rank.

Mrs. Seyton had only spoken the truth about the country before them. They were well on the

light land now; and each fence was easier than the last; till it became simple galloping ground, over which a quick thorough-bred might have held his own with St. Dunstan or Camilla. Kate was quite at her ease here; for the Kitten was as fresh as if she had just left her stable. She never forgot those delicious minutes; nor Lady Alice's winning words and ways, as they swept on, side by side, over the great fallows and sandy tilths, divided only by fences, that a horse could fly pleasantly in his stride. Suddenly, Tom Seyton began to peer eagerly forward, shading his eyes with his hand.

"Yonder he goes!"

The shrill piercing tones made even Kate start in her saddle: but her heart gave a wilder bound, as she thought she saw a slender brown streak slip under some straggling rails that nearly cut the sky-line. Frank Braybroke—despite a succession of brilliant 'nicks,' a long way in the rear—heard that screech; and put on all the steam that was left him. Several, too, in the second rank made a last desperate effort; but

every horse had had nearly enough; Will Griswold himself never could reach the leaders. As they top the crest of the low hill, a tremendous crash tells that the pack have broken from scent to view; the old hounds strain madly to the front, as they tear down the slope; and, before the middle of the next fallow is won, the straight-goer has died game, fairly in the open, within three furlongs of Conacre Carrs—his point from first to last.

So it befell, that amongst the four who actually saw the Pinkerton fox rolled over, two women's names are written. If his brush was swung that evening at Alice Langton's pommel, his head meets you still as you enter Kate Seyton's modest sanctum at Warleigh.

Though it was many a day before Marlshire ceased to talk of that famous run, I fear we may have dallied over it too long for your taste. It skills not now to rehearse how Hardress, having dropped his hind-legs into four consecutive drains, "d—d the country up in heaps," and went home discontentedly; nor how Bertie

Grenvil, after two rattling falls, thought he had done too much for profit, and enough for honour; and followed Lionel's example by a longer and more leisurely route, as will hereafter be seen. Nor how Daddy Goring—out-paced from the very first—rode the line conscientiously, taking every fence as it came, great or small; and, returning, averred, that "he had never enjoyed a run so thoroughly in his life."

All these matters—and other minor incidents—you can easily fancy. Only one remark deserves to be recorded, for its characteristic coolness. When all congratulations and comments were over, and the parties were forming whose homeward way lay together, Lord Ranksborough put this pensive question to the world in general.

"By the bye—does any one happen to know if Vereker Vane ever got out of the Swarle? He looked as if he meant stopping there when I saw him last."

CHAPTER XIII.

BYE-WAYS AND BYE-PLAY.

We were bound to keep with those who rode that 'cracker over the clay,' to the very end: but now, we have leisure to glance aside at others who have taken no more active share in the proceedings than generally falls to the lot of such as—according to the old 'tag' not more trite than true—

Spectatum veniunt; veniunt spectentur at ipsæ.

And first, let us follow the Brancepeth phaeton.

Tony Cannell turned off from the main-road at the same point at which Ralph Swynnerton had left it; but followed another lane, which led along the edge of the upland for a mile or so. They came to a gate here, which the outrider opened,

and found themselves in a good-sized piece of sound pasture, commanding a view over far the larger portion of the vale of the Swarle.

"We'll bide here a bit, my lady, if you please" —the horse-dealer said. "They're pretty sure to cross the wale with this wind: and with them glasses o' yours, you'll see 'em, as if you was in your box at the theayter."

Both Lady Laura and Mrs. Ellerslie had their binoculars ready: neither had they long to wait, as you know, before the spectacle began. Tony Cannell's small grey deep-sunken eyes needed no assistance from art: into most matters he could see as far as his neighbours—into some, a good deal farther. He watched the scene below, evidently with lively interest; carrying on the while a low muttered commentary.

"That's Squire Seyton leading on the right. Blessed if he ain't a settlin' down to his work already. And that's the strange lady close alongside of him: she as they say rides so well. Wonder how Mrs. Gaysforde likes it: dreadful jealous 'oman Mrs. Gaysforde; good sort tho' for

all that. She and the Parson are lyin' well up, I can see. And there's my lord a steamin' away on the left, with Will, and—yes, I'm blessed if it ain't—our Jim waitin' on him. Good lad, Jim: I'll make it up to him somehow, if my lord should take a fancy to the young 'un. He's going a bit too fast though: the take-off's werry unsartain to some o' them wale-fences; and the landin's ain't much better. Ah-h—I thought so: well saved tho'; but only two o' them stumbles go to a crumpler."

So the horse-dealer went maundering on, till suddenly he broke off, and spoke aloud.

"Beg pardon, my lady. Look sharp now, towards the left: you'll see somethin' worth lookin' at, I reckon."

It was just at this instant, that the leading hounds took water and Ranksborough—alone at first—rode down straight on the Swarle.

Lady Laura's blithe face grew somewhat grave; and her brilliant colour waxed paler as she gazed.

"Good Heaven!"—she said in suppressed

tones, without removing the glass from her eyes —"I do believe Denzil Ranksborough means swimming the Swarle. It's a horribly dangerous place at the best of times, I've heard; and it must be coming down in flood after all those rains. Why doesn't somebody stop him?"

"He is not easily stopped, if all tales are true," Mrs. Ellerslie remarked languidly: "nor easily hurt either. It will be rather interesting to watch him: I suppose no one else will be mad enough to follow? Mr. Armytage, I think I'll trouble you for my glasses. I didn't calculate on a sensation-scene, when I graciously lent them to you."

The person addressed seemed uncourteously deaf: he made no motion to relinquish the lorgnettes through which he was gazing so eagerly; and Blanche, in some surprise, was forced to touch his invalided arm gently, before she could attract his attention. As Leo gave back the glasses, he spoke quickly and excitedly; evidently to himself rather than to his companions.

"Some one else *is* going to follow, though. Mrs. Ellerslie, do watch and tell me exactly what

happens. But I can make out the Chief, quite plainly: he means to have it, too. Hurrah, for the old regiment! It's hard to beat, after all."

Leo Armytage was endowed with tact and perception far beyond his years. It is probable that he had taken pretty accurate measure of the state of things that morning; had guessed at what chafed his Colonel's humour; and had felt a mischievous pride in the audacious rivalry. But all such thoughts were swallowed up, now, in honest professional sympathy: he could hardly refrain from cheering heartily and uproariously; as he had done in the last Eton and Harrow match, when his school were declared winners, with seven wickets to go down.

Laura Brancepeth's brow waxed still more cloudy, as she looked down on her fascinating companion, with reproach and anger blended in her own flashing eyes.

"It's all your fault, you wicked little creature!" she said, in a discreet whisper. "The poor man was nearly wild, when he rode away. I wonder whether you would care, if he were drowned be-

fore your face. I don't believe you would—one bit."

Blanche instantly put on her favourite expression of injured innocence, in which she was simply inimitable.

"How very unjust of you, dear—" she murmured plaintively: "to lay such burdens on my poor little shoulders, that can scarcely carry their own. If men *will* be mad it's not my fault. I'm sure, I was perfectly civil to Colonel Vane: but I really couldn't tempt him to stay, with that dreadful horse of his fretting so. You can't think how nervous it made me. Besides, why should he come to grief, more than Lord Ranksborough? I don't see——"

She did see, though—something, that sent a shiver through the cone of adamant that served her for a heart: she saw the mad rear on the bank; the horrible backward plunge; and the closing of dark swirling water over the head of Vereker Vane.

Armytage had caught the glasses as Mrs. Ellerslie dropped them on her lap, and was

already gazing through them earnestly. For a couple of minutes or so, there was silence; broken only by an audible oath from Tony Cannell, who forgot his 'company-manners' in his surprise and concern—a concern not wholly professional. For the old horse-dealer had a certain admiration and esteem for the dashing Colonel; whom he was wont to characterise as "—a nice open-handed free-spoken genelman, as a man would wish to see; if he wos a bit quick in the temper by times."

At last, said Leo Armytage—drawing a long breath, as if it were he who had been taking the dive—

"It's all right, I do believe. It's lucky those fellows were working so near. One of them has gone right in, and got hold of the bridle, as far as I can make out. Plucky clod, that—deserves to be encouraged. But I never want to see such a near shave as *that* again."

La Reine Gaillarde was still too nervous to speak; and even Blanche could only assent with a slightly hysterical laugh. The three let the

chase sweep away whither it would, without a second glance, and scarcely noticed Ranksborough struggling up the opposite shore: their eyes never left that group on the hither bank, till Vane had risen to his feet, and climbed slowly into the saddle. Then Lady Laura turned her ponies' heads towards the gates by which they had entered; it was evident that the women, at least, of the party had had enough of hunting for that day. Indeed, throughout the rest of their drive, if the converse did not languish, it was decidedly much sobered in its tone.

So Tony Cannell was left alone; with none to listen to his grumbling, save the trotting mare.

"Well—if ever I see such a start as that. I can understand a swell takin' all manner of liberties wlth ósses' necks, but when it comes to risking his own——Why, there's a fine genelman like the Colonel, with a fine fortin too, goes and does, what our Jim never would have dreamt on. His life warn't as good as my old mother's ten minutes ago, I'll pound it. I wonder what the ladies thought of it? They took it pretty

cool, considerin'—specially the little un, as they say the Colonel's sweet on. And now *you're* beginnin' to fret, old girl. Well, praps we may as well be joggin' home'ards. We'll do no more good huntin', to-day: they're goin' too straight and too quick for us cripples, I reckon."

And the scarlet wheels flashed merrily away.

There is another trio that we must follow; though two only have any concern with this tale; the third being a staid and respectable groom; who had played 'propriety' pretty often, during a long service at Charteris Royal. The pair, as you may easily conceive, are no other than Flora Dorrillon and Vincent Flemyng.

The lady had avowed her intention of 'not following the hounds;' so, though they kept with the rest, as far as Pinkerton Wood, neither she nor her cavalier thought it necessary to display much excitement or anxiety, when the 'Gone away,' from the bottom of the cover, set the profane vulgar in a ferment. Little by little, they dropped back to the skirts of the bustling crowd; till they were riding virtually alone—in

the right direction, perhaps; but evidently without any definite purpose. And, all the while, flowed on unbroken, the current of low earnest talk, on subjects, indifferent in themselves; but made perilously interesting, to one of the speakers, by subtle inflexions of manner and tone. For —mark you—a cup of fair water ceases to be harmless a second after it has been touched by one of those deft poisoners.

So they loitered on through fallow and pasture; neither noticing, nor caring much, whither they went—all sound of chase had rolled far away—till Flora seemed to awake, as from a pleasant dream, to a vague sense of a *tête-à-tête* unconsciously prolonged; and suggested that "they really must try and find some of the others."

In this she seemed so far serious, as—in spite of Flemyng's half-plaintive remonstrances —to persist in questioning the groom as to their whereabouts. It appeared that, but a short distance ahead, ran a main-road, along which some of the carriage-folk were sure to be passing.

For this they made at once, at a brisk canter. But the second gate was fastened with a huge obstinate padlock; whilst the fence would barely have been practicable, had the take-off been from sound turf, instead of deep boggy ground. It was a very fair average 'stopper,' though the gate was only an average one, after all: not one of the ghastly white-painted barriers, that are occasionally negotiated by vaulting ambition in the Shires.

Lady Dorrillon, indeed, did not seem greatly alarmed or discouraged; she merely looked inquiringly at her companion, as if waiting for him to take the initiative. If the initiative meant—giving her a lead, Vincent didn't see it in that light at all. His countenance was very rueful, as he muttered something about—"turning back; it didn't much matter, as they were in no hurry."

Even whilst Flemyng was speaking, Lady Dorrillon had turned to the groom, with a very perceptible shrug of her statuesque shoulders.

"He can jump, I suppose—" she said; stroking her horse's neck carelessly.

"He can that, my lady—" was the confident reply. "But——"

Before the caution was completed Flora had caught her horse short by the head, and sent him straight at the gate. The Little Lady herself might have been proud of the performance: it was not only so boldly, but so gracefully done: the horse played his part to perfection; and the rider, neither in mid-air nor in landing, lost balance for an instant.

But Vincent Flemyng was, just then, not in a frame of mind to appreciate or admire. In truth, his was a very abnormal position; so much so, that very few men of his years have found themselves therein.

I don't mean to say that a gate—'to be taken fasting,' on a strange animal, with a rough take-off and uncertain landing—is seductive to ordinary mortals. Indeed, some of the 'Melton hards' might think twice about it, if they encountered it, alone. But the case is widely different,

when The Object is present—much more, if she hath given you a lead over the obstacle.

So, my brother, it is more than probable, that for a moment, you and I might have shared poor Vincent's qualms. But, eventually, I think we should have bespoken ourselves, much as a second-horseman, famous in High Leicestershire many seasons ago, bespoke his master.

The said master was an undaunted welter-weight. His plan was, to go sailing away, with 'Jack' in his wake, till his own animal was beat, when the two would exchange with marvellous rapidity. One afternoon, they had run into quite a strange country, and the pair still held their own gallantly; when, just below them, appeared a very formidable brook—evidently a 'teaser' at the best of times, and swollen more than lip-high, now.

Said the Earl — turning his head towards his henchman, as they thundered down the slope—

"Why d—e, Jack; here's the Mediterranean!"

That faithful follower had been out of his latitude, for miles past: but, sooner than confess this, he would have died the death. So he made answer with his wonted calm stolidity.

"I thought it was, my Lord, as we came over the hill. And a bumper it is, surelie. But—*we must have it, whether or no.*"

Most men, I repeat, on the hither side of middle age, in Flemyng's position, would have accepted the necessity; even had their valour been, under ordinary circumstances, greatly tempered by discretion. But Vincent's nerves were more intractable than those of Henry of Navarre, who forced himself—shivering—into the first of many fights. This was so painfully apparent, that the groom was moved to compassion, and came to the rescue.

"I wouldn't try to ride the mare over, sir," he said. "She's by no means safe at timber. But she'll lead, well enough."

It was a gross libel on poor 'Countess'' character: yet, if the speaker had no worse

falsehoods to own, his must have been an exceptional stable-conscience.

"It will be so much the best way"—Lady Dorrillon said. "Pray don't run any risk; it is not every horse that will jump in cold blood."

There was not a tinge of sarcasm in her voice; and her manner betrayed not a shade of anxiety. But—if you could have seen her face—whilst she stooped to arrange her habit—murmuring,

"Coward, too!"

So Vincent, the Countess, and the groom, came over in three several detachments.

If further proof of Flora's witchery had been needed, it might have been found, in the rare art with which she contrived wholly to ignore Flemyng's weakness, and to make him ignore it likewise. Any woman, who has tried the experiment, will tell you that it is far easier to deal with sullenness, than with a sense of shame. Before they had ridden a mile, the low confidential converse was flowing on, smoothly as ever;

and, before it was again broken off, Vincent Flemyng had said words that could neither be misconstrued, nor put aside. Even with female Jesuits, certain questions must, now and then, be brought to an issue.

But Flora attempted no evasion: she betrayed no sort of embarrassment or surprise; and the large lustrous eyes were rather pensive than angered.

"I ought to be virtuously indignant"—she said, softly. "But life is too short—so is my patience—for playing propriety before a limited audience. Frankly, I'm very glad—'flattered' I suppose is the correct word—that you like me. I meant that you should, when we first met. Yet you must not utter another word in that strain, till you have fresh leave from me. Do you know why I shut my ears? It is not because I am Marmaduke Dorrillon's wife, but because I am Marion Charteris's friend.

At first Vincent was rather disconcerted: for some allusion to the past he was prepared;

but not for such sudden plain-speaking. He fairly stammered over his confused disclaimer.

"I—I assure you, you are wrong. There was nothing—she could not have told you——"

Her eyes glittered, in saucy scorn.

"Don't entangle yourself in your speech," she said. "We all know that, sometimes, the whole duty of man is—to deny. But you are right, so far. Marion has told me — nothing. It is just on that account, that I have formed my own conclusions. It will be difficult to shake them: you've no idea how obstinate I can be."

"How *can* I give you proofs?" he asked, plaintively. "It's so hard to prove a negative. Yet, I would do anything——"

"I cannot help you. It would be too absurd for *me* to suggest, even if I cared to be convinced. I don't say, I do—mind! You will have time enough to tax your ingenuity, before we talk nonsense again. See, we are close upon the carriage people. And remember: till I choose to take it off, the seal is *there*."

She just brushed his lips with her fingers; they were cool and soft enough under their casing of doeskin, and the light touch would not have waked a sleeping child. But Vincent Flemyng shivered from head to heel; as the Lady of Smaylhome may have done, when the ghost's grasp scorched her to the bone.

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